

University Neighborhood as Public Good

The theme of Chancellor Cantor's inaugural year at Syracuse University has been "University as Public Good: Exploring the Soul of Syracuse,"

The Chancellor explains that the university has a special role to play in the life of the community. "We educate future leaders. We address important societal issues. Our discoveries can and do change the world. We lay the groundwork for the future as we work to preserve the culture of the past. And we try out new ways to build community."

We have been impressed with the Chancellor's efforts to create stronger bonds between SU, the city, and now the city's schools. She is certainly trying out "new ways to build community."

We believe the university neighborhood — the immediate neighborhood — has a special role to play as well. It should be an extension of the learning community centered on campus, providing a stimulating environment for the diverse population a university draws to it. This community includes professors, researchers, students and administrators — from around the country and around the world.

It also includes community members with no university affiliation — people who simply enjoy the vibrancy a university community can provide.



University Hill is home to three important institutions of higher education: SU, SUNY-ESF and Upstate Medical University. Each has its particular strengths and each offers its unique contribution to the mix of participants in the University Hill neighborhood.

But something has gone wrong on the hill in recent years. Census figures show that the number of owner-occupied households has been steadily declining. Despite the growth of

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SEUNA & WENA Meet with Mayor

This spring, board members from SEUNA and WENA (the Westcott East Neighborhood Association) sat down with Syracuse Mayor Matt Driscoll to discuss problems facing our neighborhoods and potential solutions to those problems.

The mayor and his staff have come back with some useful initiatives to better regulate student rental properties in our area. Frankly, these initiatives aren't all we had hoped for, but they are a significant step in the right direction.

The mayor's office had asked that we not make his proposals public

until the Common Council had been briefed. That has now taken place and the Common Council will be taking up these new proposals in the coming weeks.

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Last February, SEUNA and WENA contacted the mayor's office to suggest a small, informal meeting. We proposed the meeting include the mayor and an aid or two, five SEUNA board members and five WENA board members.

The meeting took place March 28th at a home on Berkeley

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Petition 1

Create New Apartment Style Housing for Students

We request that the City of Syracuse, SU and SUNY-ESF collaborate to develop new apartment-style housing appropriate for undergraduate students.

We suggest that this new housing be built either on campus, or near campus, in areas already zoned to allow for multi-unit housing development.

The goal should be to house at least 90% of all SU and ESF undergraduate students in university sponsored housing within five years.

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New student housing projects are springing up on or near campuses all across the country, but most of these new projects don't look much like your father's college dormitory. In fact, they resemble apartment buildings more than dormitories.

This new type of student housing



Aron Residences at Tulane University



North Residential Village at Case Western mixes new architecture with old

is typically built with the university's guidance and cooperation. But the university often doesn't pick up the tab, and it often doesn't own the finished project.

Gary Schwarzmüller, recently retired executive director of the Association of College and University Housing Officers International, says there has been a noticeable increase in universities building housing to keep more upper-class students on campus.

"Many schools are going from marginally residential to much more residential," said Schwarzmüller. "Much more of the stock on a given campus is put into apartment-style housing, particularly for upper-class students."

Are universities forcing students to move into these new housing developments? Not at all — students are being lured into them.

Students give up very little freedom in this new style of student housing — the days of curfews and bed checks are long gone.

At the same time, students are offered a variety of attractive amenities: high-speed internet, cable TV, covered parking, exercise facilities

— the list goes on.

Parents and school administrators welcome the on-campus housing trend. An American Council on Education study found that students living in university housing tend to get better grades than their counterparts off campus. They are also more likely to get their diplomas.

Here are just a few examples of the housing projects going up across the country now:

- The University of Connecticut had to use a lottery to determine which upper-class students would get to live in their just completed housing units. These feature high-speed Internet access, cable TV, private bedrooms and semi-private bathrooms.

In the past, juniors and seniors couldn't wait to move off campus. "Now housing is so attractive, they don't want to move off campus," UConn spokeswoman Karen Grava said.

- Boston University is completing *Student Village on the Charles River*.

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Petition 2

Reduce Density in Student Rental Housing

The current limit in city code of no more than five unrelated adults per residential dwelling is too high. We request that the limit be changed to no more than three (3) unrelated adults per residential dwelling, with the exception of groups of unrelated adults who live together in a way similar to a family.

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In 1991 the city established the "university special district" and set a city-wide limit of no more than five unrelated persons per residential housing unit. SEUNA held out for a lower number, landlords wanted no number, five was the compromise.

In the years since it has become apparent that the limit was set too high. There are primarily two reasons for this.

Overcrowding. There was a time when many students in our neighborhood got by without a car, walking to campus and back or taking mass transit. Those days are over. Every student today typically comes with their own car, often an SUV.

Five students means five cars struggling to park in the same narrow driveway. The result is cars parked on front lawns or over sidewalks. Increasingly, it means backyards leveled, paved and converted to parking lots.

Rental Conversions. With four or five students per unit, area houses have more value now as commercial property than they do as single-families homes — the purpose our neighborhood is zoned for. Twice in the past year Berkeley Park neighbors have tried to buy houses from landlords that had recently been converted to rentals. These offers were dis-

missed out of hand. The market value of these homes as rentals is much higher than their market value as family homes.

A limit of no more than three unrelated persons would level the playing field, giving families a fighting chance

to buy single-family homes for use as single-family homes.

Cities that already have a limit of no more than three include Albany, Cortland, Poughkeepsie and Oneida.

How many students live off-campus?

SU has chosen 12 universities to benchmark itself against. These are the so called "aspirational peers." SU ranks in the middle of this group when it comes to the percentage of undergraduate students in university housing.

In university housing*

Duke	85%
Vanderbilt	83%
University of Rochester	80%
Georgetown	80%
Washington University	80%
Boston University	74%
Syracuse University	73%
Case Western Reserve	73%
Emory	67%
Northwestern	65%
Tulane University	60%
New York University	55%
Southern California	37%

With a few exceptions, the best universities tend to house more of their undergraduate students. Here are student housing figures for the three undergraduate institutions *US News and World Report* ranks highest in the nation:

In university housing*

1. Harvard	97%
2. Princeton	97%
3. Yale	87%

This fall SU will house 2,311 juniors and seniors; 5,724 freshmen and sophomores, for a total of 8,035. Of these, 353 are students at SUNY-ESF (which has no student housing of its own); 550 live in SU recognized fraternities or sororities.

SU's total full-time undergraduate enrollment this year is about 11,000. That leaves about 3,000 SU students living off campus. Adding in about 1,400 students from SUNY-ESF brings the total to about 4,400. Then there are the graduate students: 1,730 SU law students and 1,660 other graduate students, plus graduate students at SUNY-ESF and Upstate Medical. Add a few hundred students from Onondaga Community College and LeMoyne College, and the total comes to around 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students living off-campus.

About 4,500 undergraduate students live on U. Hill. With rooms going for about \$450 a month, and students usually renting for 9 months out of the year, we can get an estimate of the total gross receipts for the undergraduate student rental business in our area: **about \$18 million annually.**

This is the resource that can be diverted to building new housing for area students.

* Source: *US New & World Report*, 2005. These figure includes students in university recognized fraternities and sororities.

Help us Collect Signatures

SEUNA will be collecting signatures on both petitions during the month of September. If you'd like to help by collecting signatures on your street, email us at email@SEUNA.org, or give us a call us at 472-3110.

Visit our website to learn more: [www. SEUNA.org](http://www.SEUNA.org).

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It features state-of-the-art fitness, athletic, recreational, and entertainment facilities, as well as elegant high-rise residences for students.

- The new, high-rise *University*



Student Village at Boston University

Center in Chicago serves 1,700 students from Columbia College, Roosevelt University and DePaul. It features a quarter-acre garden terrace, a game room and stunning views of Lake Michigan and downtown.

- The new Aron Residences at Tulane University, on the former site of Tulane Stadium, are designed for juniors, seniors and graduate students. The university says that “students living in Aron experience the flexibility of an apartment with the conveniences and advantages of their location on Tulane's campus.”

- Case Western Reserve University is about to open *North Residential Village*, a seven-house complex containing 749 single bedrooms, each with a double bed. The apartments are grouped into 174 air-conditioned apartments featuring living rooms and full kitchens. A meal plan is offered, but not required.

We've heard that there have already been internal discussions at SU about the possibility of constructing new apartment-style housing.

We hope our petition will encourage SU in this direction,

bringing a significant number of juniors and seniors back into university sponsored housing. We also hope to encourage collaboration between the SU and SUNY-ESF as plans for new student housing are made.

New apartment-style housing on U. Hill will provide safer, more comfortable accommodations for area students. It will also reduce the demand for off-campus student housing that continues to absorb single-family homes near campus, converting them to rental properties.

It's a win-win situation for students, home owners and the university as well.

Meeting with the mayor

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Drive. The mayor was accompanied by David Michel, the city's economic development director and a Circle Road resident.

The SEUNA and WENA boards had jointly developed a list of issues we wanted to raise with the mayor. The first of these was sidewalk snow removal and WENA took the lead.

Every year area residents end up walking in the streets because a few property owners don't shovel their sidewalks. Every year the problem is discussed while the snow is falling, only to disappear in the spring.

We encouraged the mayor to find a solution to this problem before we are forced to by a pedestrian fatality. WENA board members offered information about how this problem is handled by other upstate cities. In Rochester, for instance, the city clears most downtown and neighborhood sidewalks at the same time it clears the streets.

Both WENA and SEUNA told the mayor of problems with code enforcement. Our groups, together, had petitioned the city to enforce its sign ordinance which forbids management signs ("Joe Smith Properties, 315-999-9999") in Residential A-1 zoned areas and requires that "for rent" signs only be posted when there is a vacancy. Just walk around the neighborhood and you'll see that nearly every student rental violates this ordinance. Our letter to the city included more than a hundred pictures of neighborhood sign violations.

The mayor said his corporation counsel told him that recent high court decisions make the current sign ordinance vulnerable to court challenge. He said the local landlord association (Syracuse Property Owners Association or "SPOA") had threatened -- if the city tried to enforce the sign ordinance -- to withhold the \$20,000 a year they currently contribute to extra neighborhood policing and to use that money instead to sue the city.

We told the mayor that the Certificate of Suitability process for residential rentals was inadequate and not being enforced. The best recent window we have into this failure is a student rental at 813 Comstock that was burglarized over Thanksgiving vacation. Police found that all seven bedrooms had been broken into -- yes seven, not the legal limit of five.

When SEUNA looked into the history of this house we found that it had done business illegally, without even applying for a Certificate of Suitability, from 1991 until 1997. The owner applied for and received a certificate in 1997. This certificate expired in 2002 and the property then continued to operate illegally from 2002 to 2005.

The mayor said he would take our concerns and suggestions back and discuss them with his department heads. We later heard of at least two meetings of department heads at City Hall specifically to discuss the issues we had raised.

SEUNA and WENA were then invited to a follow-up meeting at City Hall in June. The mayor and all his department heads were in attendance.

Here is what the mayor proposed at that meeting:

1. **Information computerized.** The city currently maintains all certificate of suitability records on paper. This makes it easy for renewal dates to go unnoticed. The mayor promised to see that all certificate records were entered into a database so they could be more easily tracked.
2. **Shorter period until renewal.** The Certificate of Suitability now must be renewed at five year intervals. The mayor proposes to have renewal at three year intervals.
3. **Full inspection at renewal.** Today, when certificates of suitability are renewed, inspection of the property is optional. Unless the city has reason to believe that the owner has made structural modifications inside the house since the certificate was issued, there would be no inspection and renewal of the certificate is almost automatic.

The mayor proposes that inspections of properties be mandatory at the time of renewal, and that these inspections include both a city code enforcement officer and a city fire inspector.
4. **New "Certificate of Adequacy."** In addition to the Certificate of Suitability, the mayor proposes that landlords also be required to obtain, at the same time, a Certificate of Adequacy.

The Certificate of Suitability would be issued only once

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Meeting with the mayor

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and would not need to be renewed unless there were structural changes made to the interior of the building.

The Certificate of Adequacy would expire every three years and, when it expired, the property could not be occupied until it was reinspected.

The Certificate of Adequacy would focus on code and safety violations. Is there evidence of more than five persons living in the house? Are fire detectors in place and operating property? Are emergency escape routes blocked? Have internal changes been made to the structure that might require that the Certificate of Suitability be reevaluated?

The mayor offered no other proposals to deal with the other issues raised in our March meeting. We were particularly disappointed to hear that he and his staff had no proposal for sidewalk snow removal -- and we told him so.

But the mayor's proposed changes to the certification process offer definite improvements over the current situation. We will be working with the Common Council to develop legislation to implement these changes.

Manage or Change?

Measures for the near-campus neighborhood can be divided into two broad categories: 1) *Measures that help us better manage the current situation*, and 2) *Measures that change the current situation*.

The “current situation” is that the density of students (and their cars) in area rentals is too high, and the density of student rental properties on many streets is too high.

Important as they are, the mayor's proposals fall into the “manage the current situation” category. They will help to ameliorate the negative effects of the current situation without substantially changing it. Other “manage” type measures include:

- Meeting with students as they arrive in the neighborhood to explain how they can be more considerate neighbors.
- Arranging for additional policing for areas with a high density of student rental properties.
- Ordinances to deal with out-of-control student parties.

This isn't to say that these measures aren't important — of course we need them.

But they don't fundamentally change the situation; they do little to secure the long-term viability of our neighborhood.

What measures could actually change the situation? Take a look at the petitions we will soon be circulating in the neighborhood.

We mustn't let the mayor's initiatives slip away — they can have a significant positive impact. At the same time, we need to push for “change the situation” options — those that hold real potential to give owner-occupants a leg up in their struggle against investor encroachment.

Join SEUNA

SEUNA is a completely member-funded, not for profit organization – and the oldest continuously functioning volunteer organization in the City of Syracuse.

Your household's \$10 annual membership (or \$16 for two years), supports neighborhood communication as well as community action!

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Check amount: _____

Just clip this form and send it in with your check

Make checks payable to: **SEUNA, PO Box 6658, Syracuse, NY 13217**

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these institutions of higher education, the number of educators living in the area has also been falling.

A recent SU survey of faculty and staff living near the university has confirmed the distress felt by many area residents.

We propose two measures here that we believe are essential to rebuilding a diverse and stable community on the hill — particularly the struggling residential areas just southeast of campus.

Building new student housing on or near campus will

reduce the demand for student rental housing in our single-family neighborhoods. It will also provide students a more comfortable and attractive living environment.

Reducing the number of unrelated adults allowed in a single-family home will address the density within the rental houses. It will also reduce the financial incentive for landlords to out-bid families for single-family homes when they come on the market.

Each measure would be helpful on its own. Together they would constitute a significant step towards a revitalized family neighborhood southeast of campus.

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Special Petition Edition inside...

- **SEUNA launches petition drive for neighborhood measures**
- **Mayor proposes new legislation to regulate area rentals**