



Winter 2004

SEUNA Update



Southeast University Neighborhood Association, Inc. ~ P.O. Box 6658, Syracuse, NY 13217 ~ email@seuna.org

Neighborhood Still Losing Owner-Occupants

Fewer now than at any time since neighborhood was built

Congressman James Walsh says the formula is simple: the more owner-occupants in a neighborhood, the stronger the neighborhood. By that measure our neighborhood has never been weaker.

This issue of SEUNA Update examines the state of the neighborhood south and east of Syracuse University, both today and in comparison with years past. The conclusion? To put it kindly, our neighborhood has seen better days.

We are calling our next issue of SEUNA Update, to be distributed this Spring, the "New Beginnings" issue. There we will examine what has been done in other university communities to revitalize neighborhoods like ours. We will also offer specific recommendations — measures we believe will begin to restore the family-oriented character this neighborhood once enjoyed.

Overview

The 1990s were supposed to be the turn-around decade for the struggling residential neighborhood south-east of Syracuse University. The previous 30 years had not been kind.

Exodus

In the early 1960s homeowners all over the city were starting to consider the new housing developments springing up in the suburbs. The marketing of the suburbs got a great boost from "urban renewal" projects and the construction of I-81 which literally leveled the city's largest African-American and multi-ethnic neighborhoods southeast of downtown. Residents of these neighborhoods were forced to find new homes in other parts of the city — the result was "white flight."

As homeowners moved out, "for sale" signs went up all over town — including our neighborhood — and many houses sat vacant, waiting for

a buyer.

About the same time, the baby-boomer generation hit the nation's universities. Enrollment grew quickly

at SU and the student population began to overflow the residence halls. Enterprising business people took

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SEUNA Surveys Signs of Neglect

SEUNA conducted a survey of our neighborhood last spring to identify signs of neglect, and to determine where these signs were most likely to be found. Not surprisingly, the survey found that streets with higher percentages of rental properties also tended to display higher levels of neglect.

Modeled after a survey and rating system developed by a neighborhood association in Athens, Georgia, the survey identified 30 signs of neglect, ranging from obvious code violations like broken windows, illegal front-yard parking, sofas on porches, litter and deteriorated steps. It also identified examples of deferred maintenance like peeling paint, poorly maintained yards and damaged screens and storm windows.

Volunteers surveyed 803 houses on 19 streets east and south of the Syracuse University campus. Neglect indicators were totaled for each street, then divided by the number of houses on that street. Using this average number of signs of neglect per residence, streets were assigned to one of four categories: **Very Sick** (two or more signs per house), **Sick** (1-1.9 signs), **Marginal** (.5-.9 signs) or **Healthy** (fewer than .5 signs). Every residence was also categorized as "rental" or "owner-occupied."

Nine streets were labeled "Very Sick," averaging more than two signs of neglect per house. These included Clarendon Avenue, Redfield Place, Euclid Avenue (200-800 blocks), Ackerman

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City Says it Cannot Control Landlord Signs

On December 10th, four SEUNA board members attended a meeting at City Hall. Also present were Dennis Brogan, Director of Public Affairs, office of the Mayor, and representatives from the City's legal department. The topic was landlord signs.

Last year SEUNA and WENA (the Westcott East Neighborhood Association) delivered a joint letter to the Mayor requesting that the city enforce ordinances, on the books since the 1970's, controlling the posting of rental signs on properties within single-family zoned neighborhoods. These ordinances completely prohibit "managed by" type signs in residential districts like ours; "for rent" signs may only be posted when there is an actual vacancy.

We pointed out that these signs give our neighborhood a commercial appearance and discourage families from investing here.

The City had bad news for us: it could not enforce the ordinances.

Prior to our meeting, they said, a lawyer representing one of the area's largest landlords had visited City Hall. He warned that any efforts to enforce these ordinances would result in a lawsuit.

The City told us that due to several high court decisions since the ordinances were enacted, the City would probably lose such a suit. (SEUNA has asked several neighborhood attorneys to evaluate the City's claim – so far none

have responded).

Rather than enforcing the ordinances, Dennis Brogan proposed that the City negotiate with landlords for some type of voluntary compliance. He told us that in the 1970s the City had actually encouraged landlords to post management signs for safety reasons. It could be helpful in an emergency, he said, to know a rental

The City says landlords would sue, and they would win

unit's owner and their phone number.

Mr. Brogan proposed this deal: the City would develop a standardized, "attractive" design for management signs. Landlords all over the City would be encouraged to post these new signs. In exchange, landlords would agree to post fewer "for rent" signs.

SEUNA representatives were appalled at this suggestion. The City

would be giving its blessing to exactly the type of signs we were asking them to prohibit.

We see no merit to the safety argument. Anyone who has tried to call a landlord late some night to complain about a noisy party knows that all you are likely to get is an answering machine. If firefighters do somehow rouse a sleeping landlord in their suburban home, what will this accomplish?

SEUNA said "no thanks" to the standardized sign proposal. Following the meeting we reiterated this message in a follow-up email to the City representatives we had met with.

Several weeks later word got back to us that the City had just hired a firm to develop a standardized landlord management sign. This time we made our position very clear in a letter sent directly to the Mayor.

We have had several contacts with the City since. They promise to involve us in any decision that may be made. But the standardized management sign has not, by any means, gone away. Dennis Brogan said he wasn't entirely happy with the first design for signs and has asked for revisions.

Wouldn't it be ironic if our request to the City that it control the number of commercial signs on our streets resulted in the posting of even more signs – and these designed and promoted by the City itself?



U.S. Census Data Show 40 Year Trend of Declining Owner-Occupancy

There are three U.S. Census tracts that overlap the SEUNA area: City of Syracuse tracts 44, 45 and 56.01.

Tract 44 covers the northwestern part of the SEUNA area, plus Thornden Park to the north. Because the boundary runs along the very edge of the park, the vast majority of the homes in this tract are south of Clarendon, in SEUNA's area. Tract 44 includes both the high concentration of student housing abutting Thornden Park, and south of it, as well as the Berkeley Park area at the south which has -- so far -- seen only a few student rental conversions.

Tract 44 lost more than 200 households between 1960 and 1970, due to SU's expansion on the east. In 2000 the census found 2,312 people living in tract 44.

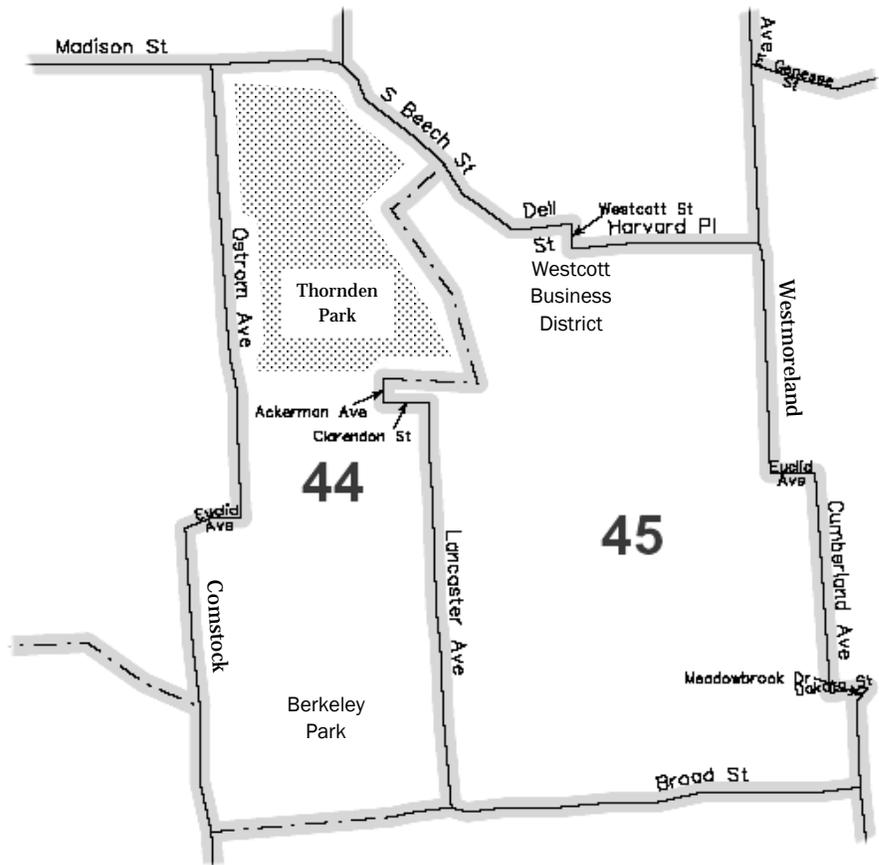
Tract 45 covers the southern part of WENA (Westcott East Neighborhood Association) as well as the eastern part of the SEUNA area. The 2000 census found 4,055 people living in tract 45.

Tract 56.01 covers the southern part of the SEUNA area, plus a leg that follows Comstock south of Colvin along the western side of SU's South Campus.

In 1960 the tract was called just "56" and included South Campus as well. In 1970 tract 56 was split into two new tracts with 56.02 representing South Campus. For this reason, discussion of tract 56.01 starts with the 1970 census. The 2000 census found 1,527 people living in tract 56.01.

Owner-Occupancy

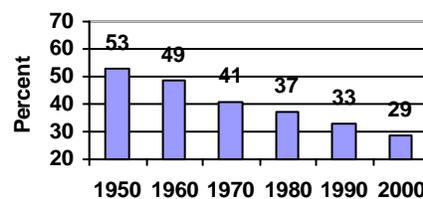
A look at the graphs for these three



Census Tracts 44 & 45

Census Tract 44

Percent Owner-Occupied

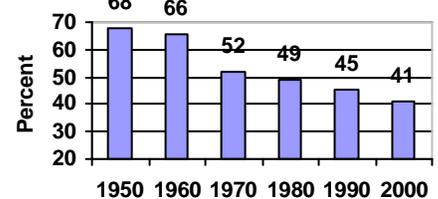


Single Family, Owner-Occupied Property Values (\$000)

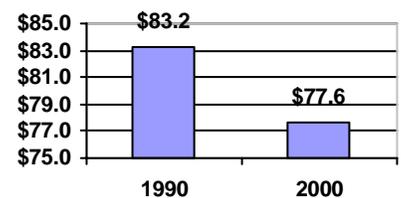


Census Tract 45

Percent Owner-Occupied



Single Family, Owner-Occupied Property Values (\$000)



tracts shows that all have experienced continual decline in owner-occupancy, going back for decades. More importantly, all three tracts experienced a drop in owner-occupancy between 1990 and 2000 — the period when we thought we were increasing the number and percentage of owner-occupied households.

In Syracuse as a whole, 37% of all housing units were owner-occupied in 1990. By 2000 that figure had dropped two percentage points to 35%.

In census tract 44, 33% of all housing units were owner occupied in 1990, already 4 points below the city-wide average. By 2000 that figure had dropped four percentage points to 29%. The loss of owner-occupied housing in tract 44 was double the city-wide average between 1990 and 2000.

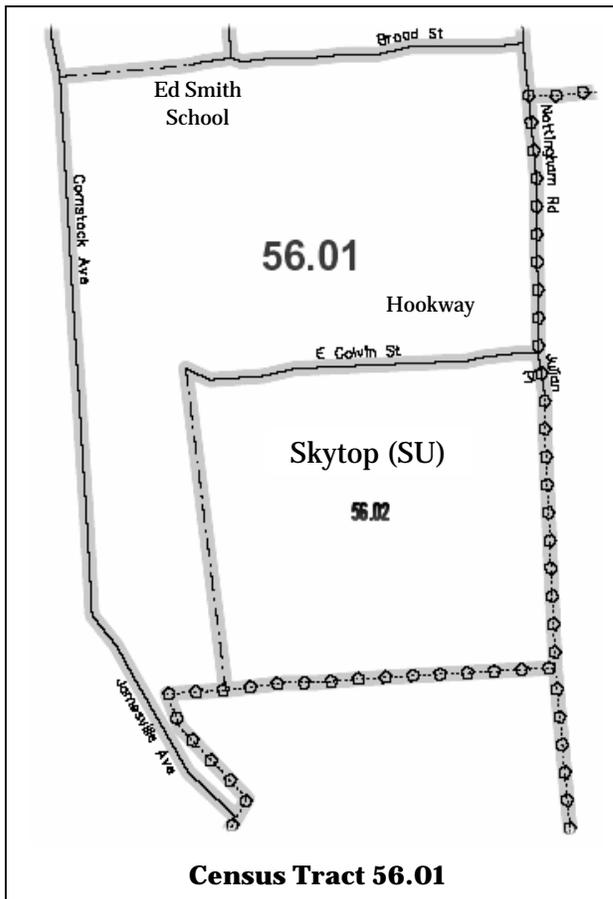
Census tracts 45 and 56.01 also experienced declines in owner-occupancy. Tract 45 went from 45% to 41%, a 4 point loss; tract 51.06 lost three percentage points going from 80% to 77%.

Property Value

Single-family, owner-occupied property values also dropped in all three census tracts from 1990 to 2000.

In New York State, the average owner-occupied home was worth \$131,600 in 1990. By 2000 the average had increased 13% to \$148,700.

In the City of Syracuse, the average owner-occupied home in 1990 was



Census Tract 56.01

worth \$67,600. By 2000 this figure had gone up slightly to \$68,000.

In both tracts 44 and 45, owner-occupied property value dropped 6-7% during the 1990s. In tract 56.01 owner-occupied homes dropped about 2% in value.

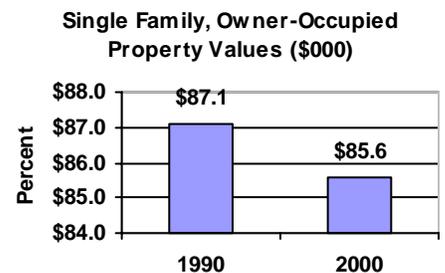
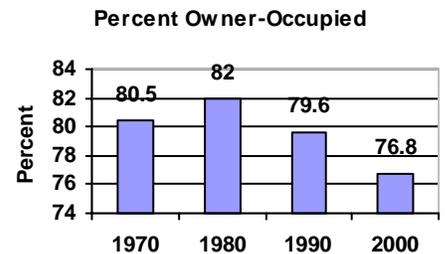
Students

Common wisdom in our neighborhood has been that the number of students here has been falling since the late 1980's due to SU's downsizing.

Census data show this isn't the case. There were actually more students in the SEUNA/WENA area in 2000 (2,956) than were here in 1990 (2,845).

Students rentals weren't leaving our neighborhood, they were just moving around. In fact, the student rental

Census Tract 56.01

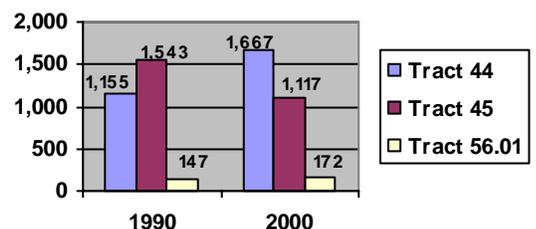


industry has been migrating in towards campus where higher rents can be charged.

Tract 45 lost more than 400 students during the 90s; tract 44 gained more than 500 students during that same time period.

Unfortunately, the owner-occupant figures show that most of the rentals left behind in tract 45 did not revert to single-family use, they continued to be rentals.

College Students by Census Tract 1990 and 2000



This only proves what we have always feared: that it's easier to lose a neighborhood than it is to restore one once it's lost.

Overview

(Continued from page 1)

advantage of these two trends – houses at bargain prices and a growing off-campus student market – and the student-rental industry took off.

Increasing numbers of students came to live in our neighborhood during the 70s and 80s, and the character of the neighborhood continued to evolve. Homeowners who wanted no part of white-flight, and remained in the neighborhood through the first wave of student immigration, eventually found even they couldn't live in the neighborhood as it had become. Many of the homes these departees left behind then became student rentals, fueling subsequent waves of owner-occupant departure.

A Glimmer of Hope

Then in the 1990s three conditions came together that were hoped – expected in fact – to turn things around:

1) SU downsizing. From the late-1980s to the mid-1990s, SU's undergraduate population shrank by 20%. This was in response to a dip in the college-age population at that time, but the University also wanted to raise its academic standing – something it has largely accomplished.

It was assumed that the reduction in enrollment would result in lower demand for student rental housing, freeing up many rentals to return to single-family use.

2) "Street Closing" money. In 1990 Syracuse University requested that the city close five streets running through or near campus. In return – and at the insistence of SEUNA – the city asked SU to contribute

\$250,000 each year for programs to benefit the neighborhood near the university. This annual contribution, administered by the city, has now risen to more than \$300,000.

From 1990 until today nearly \$3 million has been funneled into our neighborhood through this mechanism. Most of this money has gone to the University Neighborhood Preservation Association (UNPA) which offers grants and loans to help families buy houses that had previously been student rentals, or homes in danger of converting from single-family use to student rental.

3) The Certification Program. In 1991, thanks to the efforts of SEUNA, the Syracuse Common Council established the University "Special Neighborhood District." Within this district, rental properties were now required to obtain a "certificate of suitability" before they could be rented. To obtain a certificate, rentals had to conform to city codes. Also, the number of non-family tenants per unit was limited to no more than five.

Disappointing Outcome

Unfortunately, as the accompanying story on U.S. Census figures shows, things have not worked out as we'd hoped. From 1970 to 1990, our neighborhood had lost 290 owner-occupied households, about 15%. From 1990 to 2000 we lost 68 additional homes, about 4.5%. And while the average value of owner-occupied homes in the entire city went up almost 1% during the 1990s (not adjusting for inflation), average values in our area fell 2% to 7%.

The area nearest the University has suffered the most – from 1990 to 2000, 10% of the owner-occupied households were lost there.

We in SEUNA find these figures alarming. It seems clear to us that

without bold new initiatives to reverse these trends, our neighborhood will continue to lose both families and property value in the years to come.

What went wrong

Why has the neighborhood decline continued? Why haven't the measures of 1990-1991 turned things around? Here are some reasons:

A) Enforcement. As SEUNA pointed out more than a decade ago, the certification program was crippled from the start because it didn't include sufficient provisions for enforcement.

Code enforcement for rental properties, in our neighborhood and throughout the city, is a merry-go-round that starts with a complaint to the City, continues to housing court then progresses through various levels of appeal. All the while, the landlord continues to do business as usual. At the end of the process, when appeals have been exhausted and the court rules in the city's favor, the landlord may find it cost effective to just pay the fine and continue the violation.

We all know of households in our neighborhood that appear to have more than five student renters; now we have confirmation from the 2000 census.

Consider block 1001 in census tract 44. This block, just below Thornden Park, is bordered by Clarendon, Euclid, Ostrom and Livingston. In 2000 there were 40 occupied housing units on this block, none owner-occupied. Fifteen percent of these rental units had more than five tenants; 5% had seven or more.

Block 1002, just to the east, tells a similar story. In 2000 there were 38 households with only two owner-

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Overview

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occupied. Of the rental households, 17% had more than five tenants; 6% had seven or more tenants.

If we project this 15-17% violation rate across the hundreds of student rental units in our neighborhood, that's a lot of violations.

To put more power behind enforcement, several upstate cities now license all residential rentals. In Albany, properties must be inspected and reregistered every 30 months. At registration the landlord pays a \$30 per unit fee which contributes to the cost of inspections and enforcement.

B) Five is too many. As SEUNA argued more than a decade ago, five renters per household is too many.

For one thing, five young adults per household these days also means five cars per household. Census block 1001 would have been home to 40 to 60 automobiles in the 1950s (one or two per household) – already quite a few. Today that block must accommodate two to three times that number. No wonder our neighborhood has traffic and parking problems.

To accommodate all of these cars many blocks have had their interiors converted to gravel covered parking lots, complete with multiple high intensity streetlights. Gone are the lawns, gone are the gardens, gone even are many of the garages which only get in the way when so many cars have to be parked.

These days, five renters per household also means five stereos, five televisions, five hair dryers, five electric space heaters. Those of us who live in houses of similar vintage know that the electrical systems in

these homes were never intended to handle this kind of load. Combine that with a renter population that is notorious for pulling the batteries out of smoke-detectors at the first false alarm, mix in some binge drinking, and you have all the ingredients of a disaster waiting to happen.

Syracuse has been lucky so far. According to the national Center for Campus Fire Safety, during 2001-2002 11 students died in nine accidental fires in off-campus student rental houses. One of these fatalities was in Binghamton, where the victim was found to have a blood-alcohol level three times the legal limit. In April of 2003 five Ohio State students died when fire spread rapidly through their three-story rental house. Five months later, in September, three University of Minnesota students were killed in a similar fire.

Allowing five renters per household also provides landlords with the means and incentive to outbid owner-occupants when properties come on the market. We've seen lately that investors will outbid owner-occupants even on streets that don't yet have a single student rental. Once student rentals are established, families become even less willing to pay top dollar on that street – but landlords find the properties just as attractive.

Other upstate cities have set lower limits on the number of non-family tenants allowed in single-family neighborhoods. In Rochester the limit is 4 per unit; in Albany, Binghamton and Poughkeepsie it is three, in Ithaca it is two.

3) More Non-SU Students. While SU was reducing its enrollment during
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SEUNA Survey

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Avenue, Livingston Avenue, Lancaster Avenue (700-1000 blocks), Ostrom Avenue (700-800 blocks), Sumner Avenue and Maryland Avenue.

Four streets, with .5 to .9 signs of neglect, were rated "Marginal": Stratford Avenue, Comstock Avenue, Circle Road, and Buckingham Avenue (100-200 blocks).

The only "Healthy" blocks, with fewer than .5 signs of neglect per house, were Westminster Avenue, Berkeley Drive, Dorset Avenue, Terrace Road, Windsor Place and Kensington Road (200-300 blocks).

There were no streets that fell in the "Sick" category (more than one but fewer than two signs of neglect).

The nine "very sick" streets also had the highest percentage of rental properties. The "sickest" was Clarendon Street with an average of 3.9 signs of neglect per house; here 70% of all properties were

rental. A close runner-up for "sickest" was Redfield Place with 3.8 signs and 72% rental. The 200-800 blocks of Euclid Avenue had the highest percentage of rental properties (83%) and an average of 3.1 signs of neglect per house.

Four of the six "healthy" streets had no rental properties at all; the other two had only a few rental properties: Westminster Avenue was 5% rental and Kensington Road was 12% rental.

Property neglect and rentals also seem to be associated with higher crime rates. SEUNA obtained 1999-2001 Syracuse Police Department crime statistics, reported by street, and compared this with the data from our study.

Euclid Avenue (200-800) had the highest number of reported crimes (119) of all 19 streets surveyed and was also categorized "very sick" in our survey.

The "healthiest" streets, with few or no rentals, had little or no reported crime.

Overview

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the late 80s and early 90s, SUNY ESF was increasing its enrollment. On top of this, a sizable contingent of students from Le Moyne College has moved into the area, plus a few more from Onondaga Community College.

All other things being equal, landlords can charge more for rooms near the University. That's why they have been selling properties farther out only to pick up new properties closer to campus. When many of us saw student rental homes up for sale beyond Westcott, we took this as a sign that the student population was shrinking. As it turns out, it was only migrating. In 2000 there were actually more college students living in our neighborhood than in 1990.

This student rental migration has filled in many of the non-rental gaps on the streets south of Thornden Park, and converted most of Ostrom south of Euclid to rentals. Conversations are now progressing south onto Stratford. Dorset, Circle and lower Berkeley would seem to be next.

4) Perpetual Spring Break. Why have students from other area colleges moved to our neighborhood, so far from their own campuses? Maybe its the neighborhood parties that run from Thursday through Sunday every week of the school year. Crowds of students wander the streets, going from party to party. When blood alcohol levels reach a certain point, everyone seems to start shouting, fights break out and front yards are pressed into service as makeshift latrines.

The parties are wildest in the area nearest campus. In fact, the biggest dilemma facing our neighborhood may be the future of this area just

south of Thornden Park.

The local landlord association proudly displays maps showing that nearly every property in this area is now a rental. According to the census, nine out of ten households here were rentals in 2000. Half of the remaining owner-occupants in this area are over the age of 55; one third are over the age of 65. As these homes come on the market, it is hard to imagine how they could fail to become rental properties as well.

City inspectors, who have seen these rentals inside and out, say many have been repeatedly vandal-

ized by tenants and neglected by landlords. Most, they say, could never be made fit for family use again.

On the other hand, behind the "for rent" signs and peeling paint there are still many beautiful homes on these streets.

Is this area a lost cause, destined to be leveled someday to make way for inexpensive apartments or high-rise student housing? Or is there a chance this once beautiful area on the edge of the park will be rejuvenated to join a larger, thriving residential community to the south and east?

SEUNA Members! Don't miss the...

SEUNA 2004 Annual Meeting

Wednesday, February 18th

7:00 to 9:00 pm

Westcott Community Center

826 Euclid Avenue, Syracuse, NY 13210

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Bring a Neighbor! Get involved!

2004 SEUNA Board of Directors Ballot

Please vote for any or all nominees; write-ins can be added below (please include contact information). One ballot per household please.

Return this ballot to SEUNA, 935 Lancaster Avenue, Syracuse, NY, 13210, no later than February 18th — or bring it to the Annual Meeting. Be sure to clip the ballot so it includes your address, which is printed on the reverse side.

Orville Bakeman

Amber Hansel

Pat Janecek

Harry Lewis

Mary Lewis

Laura Martin

Giancarlo Moneti

John Oldfield

Dan Smothergill

I wish to nominate:

Name _____

Address _____

Phone# _____

Your SEUNA Board

Harry Lewis - President
935 Lancaster Avenue
472-3110

Orville Bakeman

James Hagarty

Amber Hansel

Pat Janeck

Mary Lewis

Laura Martin

Giancarlo Moneti

John Oldfield

Dan Smothergill

Michael Stanton

Please inform the board of directors of your concerns. Call President Harry Lewis at 472-3110, write to P.O. Box 6658, Syracuse, NY 13217, email us at email@seuna.org.

Visit our website:
WWW.SEUNA.ORG

Recent Neighborhood House Sales

in SEUNA area, as published in the Syracuse Post-Standard

Purchaser Name	Sale Date	Address	Price
Michael & Samantha Herrick	06-20-03	108 Circle Road	\$149,000
Brian & Olwyn	06-20-03	225 Kensington Place	\$138,900
Douglas A.	06-30-03	343-345 Buckingham	\$118,720
Joseph & Janet Rubleske	07-11-03	125 Buckingham Ave	\$133,000
Robert & Alexis Schonfield	07-18-03	715 Maryland Ave	\$106,000
Joshua & Elisa Dekaney	07-15-03	949 Maryland Ave	\$127,900
H. Peppermint & J. Staples	07-22-03	115 Roosevelt Ave	\$102,000
Adrienne R. Whiteley	07-24-03	796 Westmoreland Ave	\$72,000
Sarah Pickett & Amber Hansel	07-30-03	204 Roosevelt Ave	\$87,500
Ann T. Ealy	08-01-03	111-115 Buckingham	\$131,000
Eric Johnson	07-31-03	1024 Lancaster Ave.	\$88,430
Jeffrey D. Cook	08-07-03	122 Kensington Rd	\$80,500

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State of the Neighborhood Edition

Inside...

- Neighborhood still losing owner-occupants
- SEUNA surveys neighborhood for signs of neglect