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7-12-2008

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Iowa City Press-Citizen 15 (2008), 1 page.

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Before the Iowa River takes back Parkview Terrace — yet again

Marc Linder
Guest Opinion

A preliminary historical sketch of how the Normandy neighborhood came to be developed may help explain why the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the state of Iowa and Iowa City should buy out the homeowners and use the land to create natural grasslands or wetlands.

Pre-development ownership

During the 1950s, before the Coralville Dam was opened, what is now Parkview Terrace was owned by an Iowa City automobile franchisee, Clarence Beck, who rented the land out to be farmed as cornfields, on which lakes formed during spring flooding.

Not until the elections of 1956 did the city annex the land, which had been part of unincorporated Johnson County (the motivation for this annexation, like that for the purchase of the land on the town's outskirts, presumably having, been the prospect of development).

Then in January 1956, Beck sold the land to Leonard Kaplan, an owner of movie theaters in Eastern Iowa, who in turn sold it to a group including himself, Louis Shulman, a well-known local lawyer, Sam Robinson, secretary-treasurer of a local oil and gas company — all of whom had previously cooperated on other business deals; and Nilla Jensen, widow of Viggo Jensen, who owned a construction company.

After several further sales during the next year or so, the land wound up in the possession of the Jensen Land Development Corporation, Kaplan, Shulman and Robinson.

Planning and zoning concerns

By 1958-59, as the Coralville Dam was nearing completion, this group sought the City Council's approval of the subdivision it wanted to develop. But on Oct. 7, 1958, the Iowa City Planning and Zoning Commission adopted a resolution on the zoning of floodplain areas that underscored how flooding would lead to the possible loss of life and property, pollution of waters and hazards caused by broken sewer, water supply and electrical power lines.

Because such a disaster would require "public and private agencies ... to rescue and retrieve life and property and the economic loss must be shared by many people not responsible, and public funds must be expended to repair, restore or rehabilitate streets, sewers and bridges," the commission recommended that the council restrict land uses in a "Special Flood Plain Zone."

Six days later, the commission explained to the mayor and City Council that such land use was causing it "considerable anxiety." The commission wrote that the council was "being asked to consider a change of zoning of an area adjacent to the Iowa River that will be flooded in the future." The commission pointed out that flooding was a "very old" problem in Iowa City and one the new dam could not eliminate completely: "(The) engineering data show that certain conditions of natural runoff in the drainage basin will produce floods beyond the capacity and control of the reservoir."

The commission warned the council that a "degree of complacency has developed in Iowa City by a lack of understanding of the flood history of the Iowa River and the amount of control possible by the Coralville dam." Seeking to avoid being "charged with a culpable lack of foresight if we did not call to your attention that certain hazards yet remain," the commission emphasized that the city's growth and "the urge to use vacant land of close prox-

imity to the university makes the old problem a critical one for solution in the near future."

'Not suitable for residential development'

On June 12, 1959, the commission wrote to the council again about the proposed Parkview Terrace subdivision, communicating the contents of a motion passed at its last meeting: "In view of the location of the proposed sub-division, on the flood plain of the Iowa River with its vulnerability to high ground water levels, wash from surrounding bluffs, and even possible flooding on rare occasions, it is believed that this area is not suitable for residential development."

It should be emphasized that the commission was not composed of a bunch of anti-progress yahoos. Its chairman and key figure, Joseph Howe, was a long-time professor and chairman of hydraulics and mechanics at UI who had professionally studied the Iowa River. The vice chairman was Allen Tester, a UI professor of geology. And long-time State Geologist H. Garland Hershey was also a member. Other members included Charles Barker, Richard Feddersen, James Pearson and Sam Whiting.

All of the commission members, including two real estate businessmen, opposed the building plans and supported using the land for City Park or some similar project. Nevertheless, four days later the City Council unanimously approved the plat and subdivision.

The council's rejection of the commission's report has to be seen in the context of various developmental pressures, sheer boosterism and perhaps the councilors' personal denial of the possibility that the water could ever go over the spillway.

Intriguingly, less than a month later the City Council announced that it deemed it advisable to buy from the same owners 27.1 acres contiguous to the new subdivision in order to expand City Park westward.

Later that summer the council bought the land at what was apparently a low \$500 an acre.

What today's council should do

Iowa City's decision to permit the building of a residential neighborhood along the

river in the late 1950s was an urban planning mistake that half a century later has bequeathed catastrophic consequences to those living there.

To rectify their predecessors' distorted judgment, the mayor and the City Council should now do everything in their power to promote a buyout and to return the land to the wetlands that it has always been.

Marc Linder, an Iowa City resident since before the 1993 flood, hopes that this tentative sketch will prompt both those with personal recollections of the 1950s to come forward with additional information and others to dig deeper in documentary sources.

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Press-Citizen
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