

Northwestern development split friends and neighbors

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not locate along the thoroughfare. Only in the late 1970s, much to the pleasure of environmentalists, did state officials discard plans to transform Northwestern into a major freeway.

By that time, however, developers had taken their cases for rezoning to court. Although the lawsuits were started before cityhood, after 1973 a couple of the cases were still unresolved.

RATHER THAN accepting an outright court decision or a later appeal on Northwestern's frontage property, city officials entered into consent judgments allowing office developments that could be restricted and to some degree controlled.

"The village, the township (Farmington) and the city all lost in the case," said City Planner Claude Coates.

While Farmington Hills officials realized the need for some commercial development along the thoroughfare, they also realized they had to protect its citizens and the residential areas. The consent judgments were a way of doing both.

THERE WERE six consent judgments along Northwestern, said Hal Rowe, Farmington Hills zoning supervisor.

Four parcels of land, called outlots A, B, C, and D were changed from single-family to office zoning. Farmington Township also was unable to maintain single-family zoning on the northeast corner of Northwestern and 13 Mile.

After cityhood, the southwest corner of that same intersection was also changed to office. A sixth corner, the northwest side of Valley and Northwestern was changed to office uses, with restrictions.

Even as the battles raged in court, following the consent judgments, village residents continued to rally for preventing commercial growth.

"**THERE WERE** a lot of rallies to get people to continue the battles," O'Brien said.

"You're talking about people who had moved out here in the late '40s. This was a rural area," he continued. "We were really not that interested in

having the city come in to begin with." What the village was, O'Brien said, was a community of older people who were "willing and able to take care of their own needs."

First of all, they wanted no part of joining Farmington Hills. Residents had their own wells, septic tanks and bottled gas. Fire and police protection was contracted.

WHEN CHARTER commissioners were drafting a city charter, village residents heavily criticized the document for not including any provisions to prevent the rezoning of the area from residential to commercial.

Later, when city agreed to a consent judgment, David Goldman, a leader of the former village, said the commercial development was similar to the "domino theory" because it was threatening the residential zoning of the village.

"A lot of the attitudes and reasons for doing things have changed," O'Brien conceded.

BUT THE foundation behind the village residents' strong fight against commercial development and even joining the city can be traced to the philosophy behind the village.

The creation of the village, O'Brien said, was based on many "preconceived ideas," buttressed by George Wellington Smith, who owned most of the residential land.

"He tried to stop time," O'Brien said, adding that potential village homeowners were "sold on the idea that it was a village that time forgot."

Although traffic along Northwestern was increasing, that wasn't so much of a concern even when coupled with possible commercial development, O'Brien said.

"THE CONCERN was property devaluation, specifically the homes abutting the Northwestern frontage," O'Brien said.

But residents, whether right or wrong, were afraid development along the thoroughfare would bring in "undesirables" that would inevitably result in a crime increase and other problems.

"The fear of what could happen, whether it could happen or not, could destroy us," O'Brien said, recalling the village attitude.

AS IT turned out, the fear of devalued property was unfounded. Property along Northwestern has become a commercial as well as residential gold mine.

"There has been such an appreciation of property value all along here," O'Brien said.

Most of the residents of the former village have now resented themselves to the office development along Northwestern.

"You can't please everybody all the

time," O'Brien said. "In a general sense, they (city officials) have done a relatively good job in making it aesthetically pleasing."

THE APPEARANCE of Northwestern, despite the office buildings residents fought so many years to prevent, didn't come naturally.

Instead, city officials in the late 1970s saw "the hand writing on the wall," Rowe said. With six consent judgments, there was little doubt the bottom line would be office development along Northwestern.

With that realization, "we decided to come up with a satisfactory compromise with the residents," Rowe said.

The "mutual solution" city officials were looking for that could soothe residents as well as provide for controlled office development came in the form of special zone (OS-3).

THE THING was to provide reasonable use of land while protecting residential land as much as possible," said Coates.

Armed with the OS-3 zone extending to 13 Mile, city officials have managed to force developers to maintain as much of the natural topography and vegetation of land while allowing "reasonable development" of the land.

To protect the residential areas be-

hind Northwestern's commercial front, the OS-3 zone requires developers to add a 40-foot greenbelt between the buildings and the single-family homes.

THE OFFICE buildings additionally must sit a minimum 100 feet away from the subdivisions and 50 percent of the front yard on Northwestern must be open without parking facilities, Coates said. The office buildings may be only 30 feet or two stories tall so residents don't see a skyscraper when they look out of their windows.

With the height restriction "the overall density is much reduced from what it could be," said City Manager William Costick.

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