

Olde Town from page A1

River businesses in the 1990s. But it took a lot of work by residents, business people and the city to revitalize an area that was never part of the development explosion in other parts of the city.

"We had no debt service and some of our residents already had city water," says Massie Kurzeja, a 36-year resident who said she was concerned

about the area being neglected by the city. "We started a petition drive so that we could be like a subdivision association and have a voice."

With the efforts of several residents, including Kurzeja, Ida Ransbottom and Peg Harris, the Olde Town and Meadowbrook Heights subdivisions became focal points for public action to improve the area and protect zoning. Kurzeja, who still pushes for zoning enforcement, served for more than 10 years on the zoning board of appeals.

Progress: slow, sure

And although it has seemed like an uphill battle, improvements have come.

"I started more than 20 years ago to get the area organized," said Peg Harris, who moved to the township in 1951 with her husband, George. "Many people here worked to improve the area."

The two-lane road called Eight Mile became a major road and the rest of the city developed, but Section 36 was being left behind, Harris said.

"I had water," she said. "But when they built the northwest section (of the township) we were taxed for their water."

It took a long time for the roads, which were either dusty or treated with oil, to become paved streets.

"It took awhile, but progress happened," said Harris, 80.

Former City Manager Bill Costick said the frustrations of Olde Town residents weren't lost on him.

"When I first came to Farmington Hills, residents of Olde Town made it clear that they felt they had been ignored by the city," he said.

Drainage problems, water and paving problems and bad roads were part of those frustrations.

"Our hope was that when you paved the roads, got rid of the mud and dust, you'd help define the front yards and you'd see people take an interest in maintaining their property," Costick said.

Getting a share

Kurzeja and others credit the former city manager with pushing for Community Block Development Grant money to be used for rehabilitating housing so that it could meet city codes affordably.

The combination of grants, city money for roads and an involved association made the dif-

ference.

"We were bound and determined to make sure that Olde Town had its share of city resources," Costick said. "You had to redevelop that area to protect and improve property."

Rick Lampi, the city's community development coordinator, said with little new construction in the 1970s and most of the residential and business construction dating from the 1940s and 1950s, blight was becoming a problem.

"The infrastructure was inadequate," Lampi said.

But the efforts by the city and residents began to take hold by 1989. Businesses got on board as well. Along Grand River Avenue, existing businesses like Blakeney's Ranch House restaurant, Kitchen Wholesale and Smith Lumber spent thousands of dollars on renovations, landscaping, signs and other improvements. And, new businesses — Enterprise Rent-a-Car, Pop Boys and McDonald's — moved in.

With city and grant money, as well as in-kind donations such as the removal of old power poles by Ameritech, the corridor has been enriched — with more improvements to follow.

About \$1.1 million in city and grant money has been spent on the area so far. That has generated at least another \$5 million in private business development and renovations in the Grand River business district.

The improvements are the kind that will keep the area viable, and set a pattern the city can use as other areas age.

"We've been building," Lampi says. "Now it's time to maintain."

Neighborhood welcome

"We have been welcomed to the neighborhood," says Enterprise vice president Mike Kane. "The city and police have done very nice things."

"This is a good location," he said. "We have the opportunity to become an anonymous company in a light industrial area or part of a neighborhood. This is what we wanted."

The city's largest employer, Botsford General Hospital, has been a part of the improved business climate, adding an entire new wing at its campus on Grand River near Eight Mile while buying and refurbishing several buildings in the city.

Botsford CEO Gerson Cooper said the hospital has no plans to move and continues to work on one of its biggest headaches, trying to find enough parking for employees and visitors.

"We've even offered to buy employees breakfast at Vladimir's if they will park there and take the shuttle," he said.

Some of the hospital's neighbors have complained about the lighting at the giant facility, and there have been other disagreements. But the hospital continues to be an active participant in the community and tries to be a good neighbor, Cooper says.

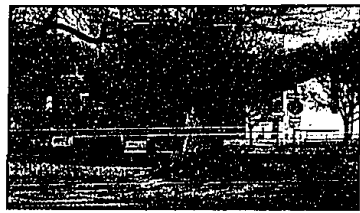
"We've never broken our word," he said.

While Olde Town is one of the most densely populated parts of the city, it no longer requires the amount of police and fire resources in comparison to the rest of the city.

Fire Station 3, which once housed the township offices, has gone from being the busiest to being



It's home: Kay Briggs, a former teacher who is active in historic preservation, stands near her street Oxford, which borders Botsford General Hospital.



Forked road: A tree stands in the middle of Pearl Street, as much for safety as aesthetics. The unpaved road harkens back to a time when most Olde Towne streets were gravel.



Forked road: The Rev. Jim Wright and his dog, Seamus, stand in front of "St. Al's" church, which serves 640 families in the area. "We are proud of the area in which we live," he said.

Keeping up

Car rental site upgrade sparks kitchen firm's fixup

BY WILLIAM COUTANT
STAFF WRITER

Now look at Olde Town

Dan Alvey now chuckles at how his home improvement business on Grand River used to be described as a "race car building."

"We couldn't stand to look at it when we came in every morning," he said.

Alvey and his brother, Peter, took over the business from their father, who had run the company for more than 20 years.

The "race car" appearance, with advertising painted all over the cinder block exterior looked bad, but was hardly an eyesore compared to some neighboring businesses.

Alvey said a vacant car dealership across the street made the location a depressing one. Having Brian advertising probably didn't seem like such a bad idea.

But with the encouragement of the city to improve the exterior, and the progress made on other sites, the brothers decided to dig in as well,

and give the store a facelift.

"It (the area) was definitely headed in the wrong direction," he said. "That dealership looked so bad. But Enterprise (Car Rental) took over that site. We had thought of moving, but decided not to."

The businessmen used the fortunate circumstance to take action, and the new look of Kitchen Wholesale, Inc. is dramatically different.

"The bottom row of windows were solid panels," he said. "It had once been a blind pig."

That and other unattractive features were changed as the Grand River corridor was improved.

"It's unbelievable what it did for business," he said. "People would stop to come in and take a look."

Although he says there is still a lot of work to do on the property, Alvey said most of the improvements are complete.

"It's an excellent market," he said, adding that Redford, Farmington Hills, Livonia and other nearby cities have a lot of

houses that are 20 years old or more.

Those homeowners are most likely to remodel a kitchen or bathroom. And Kitchen Wholesale's location is a good one for them.

"We've been very busy," Alvey said. "It has really been worth the money and effort."

■ That dealership looked so bad. But Enterprise (Car Rental) took over that site. We had thought of moving, but decided not to.

Dan Alvey
—owner, Kitchen Wholesale Inc.



Not sinking: Dan Alvey, who with his brother, Pete, runs Kitchen Wholesale Inc., says the exterior improvements to the business' home on Grand River has meant more business.

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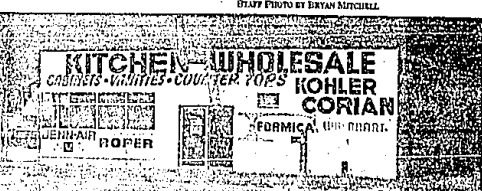
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Before, after: Once described as a "race car building" because of the way advertising was painted all over it, photo above, Kitchen Wholesale on Grand River, which specializes in remodeling, now shows a true updated look, at left.