

KEEP OUR “ARCHITECTURAL BONES” INTACT

By Julie Turner

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In the early summer of 1993, a young man living in the 900 block of North J St. distributed a flyer titled, “**We Should Care About This!**” He was referring to the recent demolition of a small “homesteader” house in his block to build a multi-plex. He said we should all *do something* about demolition of these old houses before we lost them all!

Consequently, at the first National Night Out in our neighborhood that August, a group of about 30 North J. St. residents met for a block party and talked about demolition and how J. St. could avoid it. They decided something should be done and selected two tactics to consider: ask for a zoning change, and about forming an historic district.

Ah! An awakening of the grass roots of a neglected neighborhood! Those roots began to stir and grow, as neighbors decided on a do-it-yourself project – save the neighborhood. And, did they learn a lot in the next few years! After a lot of hard work.

Roger Johnson met with the Historic Preservation Officer of Tacoma, and Julie Turner talked with Tacoma’s Planning Department. Roger got encouragement and Julie got turned down flat about a zoning change.

So, a group of 15 North J. St. homeowners met in November at the Turner home, and Historic Preservation Officer Valerie Sivinski said:

“Bring me the names of at least **50% of property owners** on J. St. who say they are interested in establishing an historic district. If you can do that, the City will write an ordinance to establish a District on your street.”

Over the next two years, neighbors discovered that getting 50% of property owners to agree to a District was not hard; learning what was in an architectural historic district, and accepting the limitations, was more challenging. Many wanted more than the Landmark Commission’s mandate would allow – no constraints on paint color, landscaping, trees, inside work would be included. Exterior structure was the focus.

Owners would need to “ask before you hammer” to assure changes would not alter the historic **architectural bones** of the building. Changes needed approval, in other words.

Finally, after Ms. Sivinski guided the group through three different City hearings, neighbors sat in the City Council Chambers in August of 1995 to hear the ordinance pass the City Council unanimously. The “*North Slope Historic Special Review District*,” from North Steele to North 3rd St. along North J Street, became a reality.

The group of neighbors had become “community activists,” who took the future of their neighborhood into their own hands, made the decision to accept oversight by the Landmarks Commission, and proceeded, over the next 5 years, to establish one of the largest residential Historic Districts in the United States.

And, all of it was a **grass-roots effort**. And, it still is, because it takes vigilance to keep what we have, and effort to make our neighborhood better each month, every year.

Keep those grass roots watered and growing! Keep our Historic District, *historic!*