

THE HISTORY OF THE NORTH SLOPE HISTORIC DISTRICT

*A personal account of the beginning by Julie Turner
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Unique for sure! The North Slope Historic District, 950 structures, is the only RESIDENTIAL Historic District in the City of Tacoma, and this district is probably the largest in the State of Washington. It was the creation of an unofficial neighborhood group called North Slope Neighborhood Coalition. This group of committed residents began its quest as a way to circumvent a destructive zoning category, but a love affair with the history of the homes soon took over. The passion to protect the historic character of the neighborhood grew to be fierce and tenacious.

In the summer of 1993, North J. Street residents were casting about for a way to save their street from further demolitions of old, run-down homes, and they stumbled on the Historic Preservation Office and the officer, Valerie Sivinski. At a home meeting in November, 1993, Valerie laid out the task ahead – survey all the residents and property owners on the street to see if a majority wanted an historic district. If the answer was "yes", then she'd write an ordinance, with the residents' input.

So, Roger Johnson and Julie Turner began the two-year journey. They went door-to-door and by phone with as many residents as possible, explaining, answering questions, and passing out written information. The goal was to build a consensus on "saving the street from the city's zoning" by putting an historic district overlay on top of the multi-unit zoning category. A modest goal of six blocks was chosen, but had to be expanded at the request of residents on adjoining blocks to a total of nearly 100 structures. The "yes" count came in at about 75% and Ms. Sivinski began the ordinance-writing phase.

A group of residents met with Valerie and discussed what was desirable to have in the ordinance. The preservation office incorporated the residents' desires, but some ideas were rejected by the city attorney. After another rewrite, Valerie was ready for public hearings!

Hearings! The word was intimidating to the residents, but they went first before the Landmarks Preservation Commission – a friendly body! – and then before the Planning Commission. Each time, several people had objections, but the residents prevailed by overwhelming numbers.

Along the way, Tacoma City Councilman Robert Evans became an effective advisor and it was he who said, "Numbers count; bring lots of people to the hearings." His advice worked, and on Aug. 1, 1995 the North Slope Historic District was born when the City Council approved the ordinance. The old homes on North J could now exist in peace.

First Expansion

Sometime in 1994, a small group of residents from throughout the North Slope neighborhood had begun meeting at the Bavarian Restaurant on North 3rd and K, courtesy of the owner. This group began working on a variety of problems plaguing neighbors, and the word of the historic district effort spread. Now, residents on other streets wanted in!

So, in 1995, the massive effort to go door-to-door to about 850 properties on 8 additional streets began. Surveyors passed out copies of the J-Street ordinance, various materials on advantages of preservation, and had residents sign an informal petition if they wanted to add on to the North

Slope Historic District. It soon became apparent that the effort would need to be divided into two segments because of the number of properties involved. The organizers decided to work on streets around North J first, and teams began educating residents on North I, K, L and M Streets, leaving the upper portion of the neighborhood for "phase III." That brought the number of owners to visit down to only about 500!

This phase – the first expansion – was the hard one. Organizers worked to get over 50% of each street, and sometimes that was DIFFICULT. A number of properties were owned by absentee landlords, many of whom were difficult or impossible to reach. In addition, it was hard to catch residents at home. Organizers often went 4 or 5 times to try and talk to owners. They used people who knew the owners to intercede, and make appointments to visit. Several group meetings were also used to try to reach owners efficiently.



While most residents agreed to join the Historic District, there were exceptions. Organizers talked and talked and talked; many hesitant owners were won over, but a few were not. Objections were commonly based on infringement of property rights, distrust of ANY city ordinance, and concern it would make a property less valuable. Organizers were even told that their effort was a plot of the CIA and the FBI!

Curiously, the owners of the large, multi-unit complexes did not oppose the District, and in many cases signed in favor. One owner gave the key – "I'll support it if my building isn't affected by it." He felt that the historic character of the neighborhood drew people to rent his modern apartments!

There was opposition at the Landmark Preservation Commission hearing, but mainly from two J Street owners who, despite meticulous public notice, had only just discovered they were already in the Historic District. The Planning Commission hearing was marked not by so much owner opposition as it was by Planning Commissioners who felt the neighborhood was trying to solve a zoning problem with the historic district. In addition, the chairman felt the proposed District was "thin" – not ALL properties were historic. The organizers were really apprehensive, but commissioners finally voted a majority for it.

With the blessing of both commissions, supporters began to rally the troops for the City Council hearing – calling, urging residents to come and be counted. Things seemed to be falling into line, with letter-writers, attendees and speakers all lined up when the major objectors to the District put out a flyer full of innuendo and false information -- just a week before the hearing! What should be done?

Once again timely from advice Bob Evans proved crucial. The City Councilman told the group, "Just out-number them at the hearing. Come in force." Hearing organizer Julie Turner put out an EMERGENCY flyer, calling in even vague supporters, phoned over 100 people to come and lined up 20 people to speak.



The night of the hearing was the North Slope's finest hour. Over 60 people showed up, the speakers spoke passionately about their love for their old gems of houses. Some people brought children tagging along, some left work early to attend; one woman wiped tears as she spoke of her home. One man described himself as ". . . only the current custodian of the historic Rust mansion."

The opposition kept speaking, too, so as the hearing progressed, more and more North Slope residents rose to speak in favor of the Historic District. They spoke quietly and loudly, simply and eloquently, but in all cases, straight from the heart.

It was a long week between the hearing and the vote. The core group of volunteers lobbied each council member to make sure the message was received that there were only 30 people against the ordinance and 275 people who signed up in support. Supporters were told to sit RIGHT in front of the Council and look each member in the eye as they voted. It worked! The vote was unanimous in support of the expansion of the North Slope Historic District.

The 25 or so supporters who attended the vote held an impromptu victory party at the home of Valerie Sivinski that autumn evening in 1997 and joy was the dominant emotion; relief was a close second. Residents experienced an esprit de corps that can only come from cohesive effort and mutual support. We had done it!

Final Expansion

The third phase of the District designation process went so smoothly that it was an anticlimax for the well-practiced neighborhood support group. A new Historic Preservation Officer, Elizabeth Anderson, had taken Valerie's place, and she guided residents to the completion of the North Slope Historic District. No opposition emerged at any of the hearings, so the final 350 properties were added without a murmur in April 2000.



Residents may now walk, jog and stroll and drive along streets lined with historic houses, interspersed with new apartments. People stop and chat about projects to fix up old houses and exchange ideas and information on preserving the old, while living in the modern world. Really, it's the best of both worlds – using yesterday's home, updated wisely, to enhance our lives today. It was all well-worth the years of effort.

Many neighbors have helped with this effort over the past ten years. Here are a few of the major contributors: Roger Johnson, Marilyn Torgerson, Marie Dudley, Chris Brosnan, Jay Turner, Barbara Tomberg, Roger and Janis Birnbaum, Kris Johnston, Velda McDonald, Diane Nelson and Peggy Trout.

In addition, the Steering Committee of the North Slope Neighborhood Coalition, with various members over the years, was instrumental in spreading support for the District.



Epilogue:

The North Slope Neighborhood Coalition has changed its name to the North Slope Historic District. The group puts out a quarterly newsletter to all residents, holds quarterly meetings on various topics, such as fixing up your old house, and earthquake safety. It organizes potluck dinners and National Night Out for socializing. The Historic District has brought the neighbors closer together and given them a common bond.

The District continues to enjoy the influx of new residents amid the rising property values of the historic homes. The historic nature of the neighborhood has increased public awareness of the special value of the old homes and people just want to live here. Plaques, given by the city Historic Preservation Office, are proudly displayed on the outside walls of the homes. Street corners are adorned with signs delineating the district, and these signs were funded through a grant written by District residents.

There is a tot-lot park on a corner thanks to active involvement of our residents, where a new apartment house COULD have been built, but wasn't. While this park will be dedicated to the late Valerie Sivinski, in reality we have Valerie to thank for the entire North Slope Historic District. She was the guiding hand behind the many residents who worked diligently for years to accomplish the goals she helped set.

In the spring of 2002, Jay Turner decided that we should be on the National Register of Historic Places, so he began the arduous task of assembling what became the 500-page National application submitted to the State Nov. 2002. The North Slope was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on March 28, 2003.

Yesterday meets today in our neighborhood. We now realize the need to preserve the places where real people lived, because that's where the real life of a city went on. Real people, real life! Now THAT is our North Slope Historic District.

