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Neighborhoods

## City Neighborhoods

### Destination: Lawrenceville

**Influx of young residents and businesses is exciting, but many questions loom about aging homeowners, gentrification**

Monday, November 14, 2005

By Diana Nelson Jones, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Lawrenceville has spent 10 years being edgy, funky or quirky. Now it's on the brink of being a destination, and it did it without big bids and bulldozers.

Since 2002, nine art galleries, several restaurants and three upscale coffee places have opened either on or near Butler Street, all within reasonable walks of each other. Newcomers are almost giddy about finding this scene a short walk from a house they could only have dreamed of owning in New Jersey and New York City. Long-timers are circumspect about what it all means.

"The question is, is this a flash in the pan or is it going to shape the landscape for many years to come?" asked James Wudarczyk, an amateur historian and fourth-generation Lawrenceville resident. Wondering how many art galleries a neighborhood of 10,600 can support, he said, "There's a balance. The future is rosy and it's problematic."

Lawrenceville faces one potential crisis that many neighborhoods have not overcome -- the decline of single-family stability. The 2000 census reported that 40 percent of owner-occupied housing was owned and occupied by people 65 and older.

"It's a demographic tidal wave that's going to hit us," said Kate Trimble, executive director of the Lawrenceville Corp. "It's the biggest challenge we face in the next few years."

She said the group hopes to catch and nurture the bulk of this housing to prevent blight as the owners die.

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"We're trying to figure out how to channel the properties into the hands of people who will be good neighbors," she said.

Edward Borkowski, who was born and raised in Lawrenceville, said he is concerned that gentrification will tax many long-timers out of the neighborhood.

"A danger looms in my mind that it's starting to happen, like it has on the South Side," he said.

Condemned and abandoned properties, open prostitution, drug dealing and vandalism remain among Lawrenceville's challenges. Serious crime so far this decade topped out at 745 in 2002, up from 703 the year before.

Systematically, it has fallen and is on track to end this year near or below 2000's 636 major crimes, said city police Cmdr. Paul Donaldson of the South Side station, who was born, raised, married and sent his kids to school in the neighborhood.

He credits gentrification in part for the drop in crime but said assistance from community groups such as Lawrenceville United, the Lawrenceville Corp. and the Stakeholders has also paid off.

"They are excellent," he said.

Cmdr. Donaldson remembers a time when "no one moved in and no one moved out, we were all just there" -- the day of the unlocked door in the '50s and '60s.

The memories that give form to Bill Sufak's Lawrenceville are Depression-era.

Mr. Sufak was 3 when his father took a job at Crucible Steel and moved the family to Lawrenceville, where 33,000 people lived. It was a destination only for those who lived there, as most neighborhoods were.

They had polka dances, butcher shops, dairies, five-and-dimes, furniture stores, tailors, seamstresses, clothes and shoe stores, hardwares, pharmacies, dry goods, repairmen. The collective sensibility didn't include antique shops and art galleries.

Mr. Sufak is 79 now and barely recognizes the place. He hasn't visited a gallery, a studio or any of the coffee places where people sit with their laptops. He does have his Lawrenceville routines, including stops at the senior center and breakfast at the Country Kitchen.

"They claim it's starting to prosper again," he said, "but a lot of businesses don't last too long. A lot of people are moving out on account of taxes."

People are also moving in.

Gentrification efforts started showing about 10 years ago, but the process

has been most dramatic in the last three.

Video and performance artist Elizabeth Monoian, 36, said she obsessed so much about buying a place in Lawrenceville that she cut a trip to Hungary short by a month to house hunt. A longtime resident of New York City, where she still owns a studio, she had been to art school at Carnegie Mellon University and never got the neighborhood out of her mind.

"I used to just drive around in fascination of Pittsburgh, just drive around, and often I found myself in Lawrenceville," she said. "It was so wonderful. I had a video project I knew I wanted to shoot here, something about the factories and textures, and being here basically put me right on the set."

"I'm moving here," said Helen McMullen of Mt. Lebanon one day in her 4-month-old cafe Perk Me Up on Butler. "I'm house shopping now."

She also picked Lawrenceville after a drive through.

"I was looking for locations for a business and loved the architecture," she said. "I'm so impressed by how committed people here are to Lawrenceville."

For Christmas last year, Quinn Leonowicz gave his girlfriend, Christine Domanic, a trip to Pittsburgh.

"It was something we could afford," she said. "We walked all over the place because we didn't know anything about the buses, and it was really cold, but we fell in love with it. We looked at the housing prices and got real excited."

In a bar in Market Square, she said, "this old drunk guy said, 'You have to come to Lawrenceville. Lots of young people are moving in there.' "

They opened their shop, Craft, on Butler Street several months ago and live a short walk up Fisk Street.

The benchmark event of Lawrenceville's transition might have been the first Art All Night event in 1998. Held in the vacant G.C. Murphy store at 44th and Butler streets, it drew 300 people and a motley collection of art and crafts, mostly made by neighbors.

It was a brainstorm of Mary Anderson Hartley and a group of her friends, who put up homemade fliers and pooled their money to buy beer and food. Ms. Hartley had moved to Pittsburgh from Chicago in 1996, opened an antique store and bemused a lot of people with her enthusiasm.

"I asked them, 'Have you lived anywhere else? `Cause if you have, you would know how lucky you are to live here.'"

"I didn't think moving here was a gamble," she said, adding that a lot of the funky, edgy, quirky people and many artists had moved in ahead of

her. "And there was the culture of people who grew up here and still live here. We liked everybody who was here."

At the first Art All Night, neighborhood native Dorothy Tokarski walked up from her home a few blocks away, eager to see the old five-and-dime lit up again for whatever reason.

"This is what they should do more of," she said. "I hope they do it again. Young kids are coming in."

The eighth annual Art All Night in April in the blue building of the old Heppenstall mill drew 6,000 people. Cmdr. Donaldson was there with his wife, as he had been for the first one.

"I worked at Heppenstall before joining the police force," he said, "and it was like I could see the mill as it was. I was telling my wife, 'That's where the lathes were, that's where the forge was,' and all around us there were all these artists."

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(Diana Nelson Jones can be reached at [djones@post-gzaette.com](mailto:djones@post-gzaette.com) or 412-263-1626.)

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