

Saving Edgewater historic homes turns into zoning battle

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SPECIAL TO INSIDE

Groups in Edgewater who are fighting to save historic single family homes that date back to 1885, when Edgewater was founded as a township, have met a contentious battle with condo developers.

On Sept. 8, the planning and development committee of the Edgewater Community Council (ECC) voted against a development at 6117 N. Winthrop Ave. This is just one more vote in weeks, if not years, of contention.

On Aug. 27, Ald. Mary Ann Smith (48th), her planning and zoning committee, and the Edgewater Triangle Neighbors Association (ETNA) approved an ordinance to downzone the area within the ETNA block club limits from R4 to R3. This would prohibit three flat condominiums from being built. The ordinance would have two caveats: neither Wayne nor Ardmore avenues would be included in the downzoning since these two streets have many pre-existing large buildings.

On Sept. 4, Ald. Smith presented the ordinance before the zoning committee of the City Council. "With this ordinance we are trying to stop the tear downs and protect the nature of the community," said Smith.

The Edgewater Historical Society (EHS), which gives home tours of the historic dwellings during the spring and summer, "favors downzoning. 'We're opposed to the demolition of all older homes,'" said Kathy Gemperle, president of the EHS. "The only way to save these single family homes is to downzone to a level where condos can't be built. Edgewater only has 10 historic homes left."

Gemperle added that the city upzoned the area in the 1920s to allow for high rises such as the Sovereign Hotel on Granville Ave. The Sovereign stands on property that previously was five single-family homes. "There were lovely homes up until the 60s. Some of them were subdivided because of the economy. Now, the economy

says let's throw the last few of them away and put up multiple units," Gemperle said.

Further north in Edgewater a 115-year-old house is slated for the wrecking ball. The house at 6117 N. Winthrop Ave. belongs to former president of the Edgewater Community Council (ECC) Barb Stanley. Stanley and

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Rae Ann Surley
ECC president

her husband, who have lived in Edgewater for 14 years and are lifetime Chicago residents, are moving to a newly purchased home in Evanston to escape the pervasive crime that plagues the

6000 block of Winthrop Ave. Stanley said that she cannot let her children out to play and that police with guns run through her yard chasing drug dealers. Stanley's home is one of two historic homes on the 6100 block. The home has 2,630 sq. ft. and 7,500 sq. ft., that is more than double the size of a standard Chicago lot.

"I think it's terrible if they downzone the neighborhood and prevent homeowners from getting the full price on their property," Stanley said. However on June 24, 2002 at Truman College, according to old memos in the zoning department, Stanley gave a passionate speech to the mayor's subcommittee on zoning reform favoring the protection of historic homes in Edgewater.

"We fixed this house up, added a new roof, and we are sorry to have to leave — but the city doesn't give you in services what your tax dollars pay for. According to the assessor, our tax bill is \$9,000 this year. It's doubled from what we were paying."

Stanley sold her home to developer Jim Byrne, who owns several properties in Edgewater and also is a resident of the neighborhood. Stanley's home sat on the market for awhile and was turned down by many prospective buyers who liked the house but not the street scene outside. Byrne bought the house for \$700,000. According to Byrne that is double what Stanley could have made if she had found a family to buy it as a house. He plans to build eight luxury condo units.

Byrne, a newly appointed co-chair of the planning and zoning

committee of the ECC, said he stood to lose a lot of money on his investment in 6117 N. Winthrop Ave. if downzoning were to take effect before his project was completed. "There're only two houses left on that block and neither fits on the block anymore," Byrne said. "The zoning of the lot can take 14 units and I am only putting in eight — so I am not maxing out the density. All my developments have had a positive impact on the community."

Byrne said he met with Ald. Smith and the city is considering moving the house. The Park District has expressed an interest in moving it to their property.

"I love Edgewater. It's a great community. I'm working for the future of Edgewater to keep it a great community for a family," he said.

Rae Ann Surley, a developer and building owner in Edgewater who owns an apartment building next to Stanley's house, feels terrible to see the house go but sees no way around it if the long-term goal is to improve the neighborhood. Surley recently stepped up to the plate to become the

new ECC board president

"It's painful that all the home owners will be gone but no matter which way it goes it will hurt someone," she said. "If you downzone, it will hurt the owners of the single-family homes by reducing their property values. If you don't downzone, all the single-family homes will be taken down and the character will be taken out of the community. The question is: Who wants to feel the most pain?"

Surley added that having condo owners in the neighborhood might help clean up the crime.

"We have tried for years to clean up that block. It is very difficult to find people to give their time if they are renters or not invested in the area for the long-term," she said.

Ald. Smith suggested that the EHS convince people of the historic and cultural value of these homes in creating the neighborhood of Edgewater.

It saddened Gemperle to hear that 6117 Winthrop Ave. might be torn down. "Do you think I care about his [Byrne's] money? I'm concerned about the house. It

has been nicely restored on a nice lot. Last year, we had it on our tour of Edgewater homes."

The Edgewater Beach Neighborhood Association (EBNA), the block club where the house is located, voted 13 to 3 with one abstention to support the new development project at their last meeting on Sept. 7 at the Thai Grille.

On Sept. 8, the planning and development committee of the ECC voted against Byrne's development on 6117 N. Winthrop Ave. "I made my presentation, then answered questions, and then I stepped out while the committee discussed it," said Byrne. "When I returned they had voted. I found out later that the EHS and other preservationists had loaded the meeting."

The ECC executive board voted on the development yesterday, Tuesday, Sept. 16, at their board meeting held at their office, 6044 N. Broadway, after Inside's deadline.

The Edgewater Historical Society will hold another tour of historic homes on Sept. 21 at noon beginning at the museum, 5358 N. Ashland Ave.