

VANISHING WHITE PICKET FENCES: CHANGING NEIGHBORHOOD DYNAMICS

Changes are rapidly taking place in society and may be seen in virtually every facet of life. One that particularly stands out to me is the **steady decline of the traditional family home**. I grew up in the Macalester-Groveland neighborhood, just seven blocks north of Highland Park, a tree lined neighborhood with an area of 6 square miles. I have read with interest the articles surrounding the tentative deal between Ryan Construction Companies and the City of Saint Paul. The 122-acre parcel may only be developed after a formal agreement with the city. The land is still owned by the Ford Motor Company, as are the popular Little League fields located off of Cleveland Ave. Final sale of the land can only occur after a city approval of the site plan, an exhausting process that has taken **nearly a decade** of negotiations within the community.

The Highland Park neighborhood is home to 24,000 residents and comprises 3864 acres. This computes to 6.2 persons per acre, or **4072 persons per square/mile**. While comprising just **3% of the total land** area, the Ford Plant site will eventually house roughly 7,200 people. That computes to a density of **34,133 persons per square/ mile**. For comparative purposes, according to “Neighbors for a Livable Saint Paul,” U.S. Census data shows this would result in a **density equal to the Bronx** borough of New York! The neighborhood’s population will increase by 30%. Please do not ask me where people will park or how the streets will handle the added traffic, because I haven’t a **clue**. Neither does it appear that anyone else knows, and that is a major concern.

The **plant** produced its last Ford Ranger truck on December 16, 2011, nearly eight years ago. The plant’s closing was announced in 2006, but it stayed open several years past its scheduled closing date, a sign of its **resilience to change!** A plant after my own heart! My, how time flies. The Ford plant was in operation from 1925 to 2011. A majestic span across the Mississippi River was constructed, originally called the Intercity Bridge. But it soon became known as the Ford Bridge, a name that stuck. Henry Ford was attracted to this locale due to a promise of hydroelectric power from the river. At the time of its closure, it was the **oldest Ford plant** still in operation. The 122-acre site development will only take final shape over the course of the next 15-20 years. By then, yours truly will be waxing eloquently about the halcyon days of his priesthood, comfortably ensconced in my apartment at the Byrne Residence for retired priests!

Growing up, the Ford Assembly plant was part and parcel of our daily life in my neighborhood. We would ride our bikes around the periphery of the massive plant, though we were afraid to ride the bikes down the steep hill to the parking lot near the river. In fact, the riverbed was “off limits” by direct order of my mother (without possibility of appeals to Dad!) The sounds of traffic began at 4:00 a.m. as plant workers drove to their morning shift via Cretin Ave., just two houses east of our yard. Though I was never a “truck guy,” I am the proud owner of my third Ford car, a reflection of my long-standing admiration for the company. I marveled at the vast expanse of land they had, peeking over fences to gain a glimpse. A grade school field trip to see the assembly process fascinated me.

Perusing the slick conceptual drawings, what hit home (pun intended) is neither the water features nor the walking paths, but the nearly **complete lack of single-family** homes. Additionally, with city government regulation, no master building plan would have passed muster unless 20% of the projected 3800 housing units were designated as “affordable housing.” Reading the site plan’s fine print is quite revealing. Here’s the breakdown: 2,250 market-rate apartments; 750 “affordable” units; 280 row houses; **35 single-family homes**; 85 condos; 400 senior rentals. Thus, only 400 of the 3800 units (**10.5%**) will be privately owned, compared to the current **57%** of Highland’s housing units. According to a survey, only 43% of Minnesota millennials are on track to buy a home. Today, people move more frequently and prefer the flexibility of rentals. But neither do families build up home equity. In short– that changes a neighborhood.

Why get into the weeds with all of this? In short, the **traditional family neighborhood** is becoming a relic of a bygone era. The white picket fence is going the way of china patterns, silverware and linen tablecloths. Certainly, people dwell in high density apartments all around the world. That’s not my major concern. However, a declining birth rate has severely **diminished the demand** for the traditional single-family home. Fewer

people want to live on a 40-foot plot of land that requires lawn care, shoveling and home maintenance. I can certainly appreciate that. But it is equally true that fewer couples desire **larger families**. Highland Park has been attractive due to its traditional neighborhood feel in which **people plant roots**, becoming invested in the community. Time will tell how these changing trends will impact the neighborhood gem dating back to the 1860's, nestled in the southwest corner of our capital city.

- With great joy, the Diocese of Peoria announced that **Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen** will be beatified at the Cathedral of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception in Peoria on December 21, 2019. He was ordained a priest in that very cathedral on September 20, 1919. A long battle had ensued between the Archdiocese of New York and the Diocese of Peoria as to the final resting place of the Venerable Sheen. New York lost several legal appeals for his resting place to be the crypt of St. Patrick's Cathedral. I think he is exactly where he ought to be— his hometown! He was a magnificent teacher who inspired generations.
- Even 50 years after the second Vatican Council, we are still refining our understanding of the nature of the **permanent diaconate**. Pope Francis recently offered words of caution: “Move the deacons away from the altar...They are the custodians of service, not first-class altar boys or second-class priests.” True enough, but we all agree that our deacons here are **first-class servants**! We are greatly blessed with the service of **Deacons Phil Stewart and Ron Schmitz** and I am honored to serve with them here!
- The Vatican's Financial Information Authority (AIF) recently has suffered resignations of several key personnel. The AIF has competence in the area of **compliance** with international banking standards. It is all extremely complicated and way over my pay grade, but that compliance is now an open question. It potentially diminishes the credibility of Vatican finances on the world stage in terms of transparency.
- As the Ramsey County Attorney's Office prepares to potentially wrap up its four-year oversight of the Archdiocese, I was asked to give a priest's perspective of how the **culture has changed** in these four years. My view? Priests and laity alike are working together to ensure safe environment for our children that far exceeds what would have occurred without such oversight. Thus, the Ramsey County agreement with the Archdiocese **moved the ball** forward, and we are not going to regress, ever again.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector