

Silver/Vawter Area Safety: Planning Solutions

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From August of 2010 through April of 2014, Maximillian Mahalek conducted a Master's Capstone project that looked at potential planning-related solutions to issues of crime and building safety in the Silver/Vawter area of southeast Urbana. Maximillian completed this project as a part of his studies towards a Master of Urban Planning, and it was closely related to his work as a Planning Intern and Community Development Associate with the City of Urbana. The following is a summary of a larger report that the author offered to both the City's Community Development Services Department, as well as the Southeast Urbana Neighborhood Association (SUNA) as a client group. Please note that the findings presented here are those of the author, and not of the City of Urbana, IL. Furthermore, the opinions voiced by respondents to the project's survey and interviews are solely the opinions of those respondents. Maximillian would like to thank the City of Urbana Community Development Services Department, Alderwoman Marlin, Lieutenant Fitzgerald (Urbana Police Department), the Southeast Urbana Neighborhood Association, and a myriad of others for their support.

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Section I. Study Area Location and Demographics

The project's study area, often referred to as the "Silver/Vawter area" is located in southeast Urbana. As mapped below, it is bordered by Cottage Grove Avenue on the west, Mumford Drive on the south, Philo Road on the east, and Colorado Avenue on the north. This study area is located just to the south of the Sunnycrest shopping complex on Philo Road, as well as Crestview Park, and is located east of Yankee Ridge School, which is a major attraction for residents.



The study area has 447 households. The western half of the study area is mostly made up of single-family and duplex residences, while multi-family buildings are concentrated in its eastern half. Many of the study area's demographics are similar to that of the city's as a whole. However, the neighborhood has a median family income that is 47% below the city's. Twenty-

one percent more families are below the poverty rate than throughout the city, 19% more of the households in the study area are led by single women, and 21% more of residents utilize SNAP benefits in the study area when compared to the city as a whole (source: <http://www.census.gov/>).

Neighborhood residents and property managers have noted that, over the last ten years, there has been a significant shift in the community's rental population away from students towards lower-income families. The number of Section 8 Vouchers being utilized in the study area has almost doubled during that time to roughly 15 vouchers (sources: Champaign County Housing Authority and local property managers/residents).

Section II. Maintenance Issues in Study Area

There are significant maintenance issues present in the study area. Many of these are found among the multi-family buildings, and several, including broken windows and deteriorated stairs/balconies, can potentially create a life safety hazard. These observed issues also imply that some property owners do not care about their property and/or the neighborhood as a whole:

- Broken Windows
- Fallen Fences
- Deteriorated Doors/Gates
- Deteriorated Stairs/Balconies
- Overflowing Dumpsters/Litter on the Ground
- Unused Satellite Dishes in Yards
- Broken Basketball Hoops

III. Design Issues in Study Area

Along with the maintenance issues noted above, there are also issues of problematic design in the study area, including with both public and private property. Some of these issues, such as hidden common spaces inside buildings, can create physical opportunities for crime to occur. These design-related issues include the following:

- Lack of Sidewalks (*Particularly Along Vawter Street*)
- Lack of Windows Along Building Frontages ("*Blank Walls*")
- Hidden Public Spaces Within or Behind Buildings
- Stairs and Unit Doors Exposed to the Elements
- Sparse Streetlights that are Not Pedestrian-Oriented
- Recessed Entrances Hidden by Vegetation
- Poor Separation between Public and Private Property (*Particularly Among the Multi-Family Buildings*)
- Zoning Incompatibility: Western Half of the Study Area is Zoned Mostly Low-Density Residential while the Eastern Half is Zoned Mostly High-Density Residential
- Unsecured Green Spaces Behind Multi-Family Buildings that are Accessible to the Street

IV. Crime Issues in Study Area and Relationship to Maintenance and Design Issues

The study area is located in Police Beat 65, which had the second highest number of crimes in Urbana from January through October of 2014 (despite having a roughly similar population to that of other Police Beats). Crime in this Beat peaked in 2011, at roughly 1,600 incidents, and has since then decreased to around 1,300 crimes annually. The study area itself matches the borders of Police Patrol Area 605-08. When focusing on January through October of 2014, the most common crimes in the study area were:

- Battery (5% Up from the Same Months in 2012)
- Theft (15% Down)
- Vandalism (45% Down)
- Drug-Related Incidents (90% Up)

When comparing the first 10 months of 2012 to the first 10 months of 2014, the biggest increases in crime in the study area were seen in drug-related incidents (+90%) and weapon-related charges (+71%). Several incidents increased from 0 to 1: stalking, home invasion, and hate crimes. The biggest decreases were seen in motor theft (-100%), phone harassment (-80%), and burglary (-67%).

The majority of crime incidents (including many of the battery and drug-related incidents) took place among the multi-family buildings located in the eastern portion of the study area. This is the area where the building maintenance and design issues noted above were most prevalent. The maintenance issues help illustrate that people may not care sufficiently about their properties (or what goes on in them), despite financial resources often being available to address these problems, while the design issues create spaces that may be hard to patrol, but are accessible to criminals. These concerns were voiced during the author's outreach to the study area's stakeholders, as discussed below.

Among the single-family and duplex residences in the study area, vandalism and theft were the most common criminal activities. Some of these buildings are in need of general repairs, and many have recessed entrances hidden by vegetation that present safety hazards.

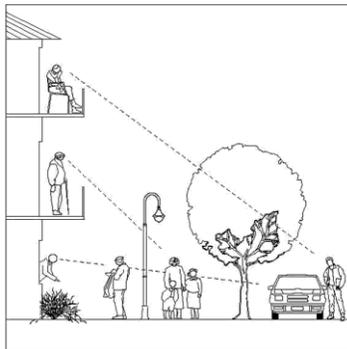
According to the Urbana Police Department's records, a homicide took place in the study area in 2011, and one took place near the study area in 2013.

V. Safety Needs and Safety Planning through Environmental Design (SPTED)

Many planning paradigms, including LEED-Neighborhood Design and Smart Growth Principles, have nonspecific references to promoting community patrols and preserving building maintenance. These approaches suggest enhancing accessibility for emergency responders, and ensuring regular inspections to maintain the structural integrity and aesthetics of buildings. However, they do not provide specific guidance on how to mitigate crime issues and preserve building maintenance (source: Derek Paulsen, Crime and Planning (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2012)).

Fortunately, there is one paradigm that helps make these connections and offers concrete solutions: Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED). In the study area, safety includes both issues of building safety and criminal activity, and so the author refers to this field

as Safety Planning through Environmental Design (SPTED). This paradigm emphasizes four areas:



Natural Surveillance-
Ensuring lines of site that increase visibility within the community.



Maintenance-
Preserving maintenance of buildings to protect life safety and to show someone cares about their property.



Territoriality-
Separating private and public property through aesthetically appealing means.



Accessibility-
Limit accessibility to private property, but in a manner that preserves transparency.

VI. SPTED Precedents

Elements of SPTED have been incorporated into overlay districts as a form of design control in two communities in Florida: West Tampa and the North Tamiami Trail in Sarasota. Note that an overlay district is an additional district placed above an already established zoning district that offers certain incentives or regulations aimed at achieving a specific goal. These communities had been suffering from underinvestment and high crime for many years, and their overlay districts were aimed at promoting safety through design.

In both the North Tamiami Trail and West Tampa Overlay Districts, certain regulations were incorporated to help reduce the physical opportunities for crime to occur. These included additional lighting regulations, increased transparency along frontages, and limitations on hidden

spaces. Building maintenance issues were addressed with additional requirements for landscaping maintenance and inspections, while pedestrian safety was promoted via requirements for increased in sidewalk connectivity. Incentives took the forms of zoning variances.



An illustration of some of the example overlay districts’ principles at work.

Overall, these communities benefited from decreases in crime and increases in investment since the overlay districts were introduced. These trends were the result of multiple factors, including the impacts the overlay districts had (source: www.tampagov.net and www.sarasotagov.com)

VII. Stakeholder Survey and Interviews

Along with studying examples from other cities, the author wanted to reach out to the study area’s residents and other stakeholders and see what their opinions were regarding planning-related solutions for their community.

From December 15th, 2014 through January 15th, 2015, the author offered an online survey to those who lived, owned property in, worked in, or visited the study area. Paper copies of this survey were also offered via mail and were distributed at the County Market located at 1819 S. Philo Road. More than 270 responses were received. The following common themes were present in the survey results:

- Interest in Safety-Oriented Design Requirements for Multi-Family Buildings
- Weak Social Connections in the Neighborhood, Particularly Between the Homeowners and Tenants
- SUNA has been successful in Organizing Homeowners



- Respondents Feel Unsafe Walking at Night, Particularly through Dark Parking Lots
- Police Cannot See What is Going On Inside and Behind Buildings
- Property Often Stolen off Commonly Shared Balconies
- Neighborhood Needs Increased Vegetation and Reduced Litter
- More Upscale Businesses Desired
- Sidewalks Would Improve Pedestrian Safety
- Landlords/Property Managers Need to Better Filter Applicants and be more Responsive
- Residential Density too High

60% of the survey respondents were homeowners, although 54% of the residential units in the study area are rental. Consequently, the author also reached out to the study area's apartment tenants by conducting door-to-door interviews. He also interviewed a property manager, homeowners, local business managers, elected officials, City staff, and others. The following common themes were voiced throughout these interviews:

- Safety Plans for Problem Buildings Have Been Successful, but Need to be Applied to Nearby Buildings Owned by Same Landlord
- Many Evicted Residents are Taken Up by Nearby Landlords
- Property Values in the Area are Falling
- Rental Registration has been a Successful Tool for Most Buildings
- Police have Efficient Response Time, but there are too Many Different Officers Conducting Patrols
- Tenants do not Know Where to Report Unaddressed Maintenance Issues
- Balconies and Stairs Exposed to Elements and Not Properly Cared For
- Many Apartments Being Used by Temporary Residents and are Over-Occupied
- Youth Programming Needed
- Some Landlords/Managers are Concerned that the City Does Not Keep them Aware of Changes to Regulations
- Condominiums in Study Area becoming Rental Units
- Too High a Concentration of Below-Average Rents in the Study Area
- Parties Often Occur in Parking Lots
- People Jump Over Fences and Run Through Yards
- Local Businesses Losing Potential Employees/Customers due to Fears of Crime



VIII. Recommendations: Municipal Practices

Based on the results of the author's research, as well as his outreach to the study area's stakeholders, the following recommendations were made with regards to municipal practices. Some of these recommendations will require significant political support and financial investment.

- Require design regulations in an overlay district that minimize the physical opportunities for crime to occur. Incentives, such as credits allowing zoning variances, could also be offered within this district. This approach could be implemented by a public board, through the Special Use Permitting Process, and/or via Zoning Administrator Review.

Regulations/incentives could be applied to only multi-family buildings or to the entire study area.

- Train Community Development Staff and other City Staff in SPTED principles.
- Expand safety plans to nearby buildings owned by the same landlords.
- Promote tools by which tenants can report building maintenance and crime occurrence issues.
- City should contact both property owners and managers when building safety/zoning violations are discovered.
- Incentivize increased number of self-inspections by landlords, possibly financially or through Rental Registration/Safety Plans.
- Enhance enforcement of building safety violations. Integrate Finance, Public Works, and Community Development, as well as Police Department, into this process.
- Promote best practices among landlords.
- Consider downzoning R-5 zoned lot along S. Cottage Grove to ensure continued single-family use.
- More on-foot/bicycle patrols by Urbana Police Department by same officers on same days.
- Include study area as a City Target Area to fund infrastructure improvements (see Section IX). Funding could also come through the creation of a Business Improvement District.
- City should coordinate with Mass Transit District and Urbana Business Association to promote the Philo Road Business District.

IX. Other Recommendations

The author made other recommendations in the area of community organizing, infrastructure improvements, and economic investment. Some of these recommendations would require significant political support and financial investment.

- Southeast Urbana Neighborhood Association should also focus on reaching out to multi-family building tenants.
- Tenants should organize, where possible. Potential focus should be placed on neighborhood watch program.
- Neighborhood organizations should coordinate with City Staff, Public Health District (including Mobile Clinic), mental health service providers, elected leaders, local churches, local businesses, etc.
- Funding through establishment of a City Target Area could allow for installation of sidewalks and pedestrian-oriented streetlights. Funding could also support a neighborhood clean-up program (see Section VIII).
- Neighborhood would benefit from paved bus stops along Silver Street.
- Neighborhood would benefit from pocket playground or community center/youth programming.