The New York Times Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers here or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. Order a reprint of this article now.

March 25, 2011

Trying to Save a City, or at Least a Part

By A. G. SULZBERGER

DETROIT — In a city where residents are still fleeing at a historic rate, there is no shortage of clichéd reminders that this place has been redefined by abandonment: crumbling factories, blocks filled with boarded-up houses, and empty streets overgrown with weeds.

But here, along the tidy, tree-lined streets that wind through a collection of neighborhoods known as Grandmont Rosedale, where owning one of the stately brick homes has long been a local symbol of success for the city’s striving middle class, residents are digging in to fight the flight and hold their community together.

They chip in for services the city has trouble affording, like snow plowing. They band together for neighborhood crime patrols. They run sports leagues, hold block parties and circulate community letters.

And they try to keep the place filled with people.

Marsha Bruhn, a longtime resident and retired director of the Detroit Planning Commission, watched with alarm as several nearby houses fell into disrepair after their owners departed.

First she paid to have the lawns mowed. Then she ran off squatters. Finally, she took a bolder step: buying, renovating and reselling two houses. And she is in the process of trying to buy a third.

“I did it because I was tired of what was happening,” Ms. Bruhn said. “It was having a negative impact on my property, on our street and our neighborhood. I want to be part of the solution.”

The dedicated corps of local volunteers is having some success, though victories in Detroit are measured by a different standard.

Once the fourth-largest city in America, with a peak population of 1.85 million, Detroit now ranks 18th, with 713,777 residents, according to census data released this week.

One in four residents left over the past 10 years; those who remained are plainly unable to fill the generous borders established during more optimistic times.

Pockets of prosperity remain throughout the city, but they are increasingly the exception. The Grandmont Rosedale area, about 15 minutes northwest of downtown, does not have the highest

incomes or biggest homes, though both are well above average. But it has used a fierce sense of community to market itself as a safe and stable alternative to the suburbs.

The population here, unlike that of most of the city, actually grew in the 1990s. At the start of the decade, the vacancy rates for homes was less than 3 percent, a fraction of the citywide average. James Tate, a City Council member and lifelong resident, said that commitment to the community — about a third of people here pay voluntary dues — protected the neighborhood.

“The lesson we learned,” he said, “is that it’s important that a neighborhood doesn’t slide into a blighted situation in the first place.”

But there are troubling signs that have many inside and outside the community worried about just such a slide.

The population dropped over the past decade by 2,122, or 14 percent, to 12,617, said Dale Thomson, an assistant professor at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. The vacancy rate has reached 10 percent. One of those empty houses, sold for $14,000 to a local redevelopment nonprofit group, once belonged to a former president of General Motors.

“If that neighborhood goes, the city goes,” said Kurt Metzger, an urban affairs expert and demographer who studies census data for the city.

Marja Winters, deputy planning director for the city, said that in the past Detroit put a priority on funneling money into the most distressed communities, believing — or hoping — that healthier communities could take care of themselves.

But even strong participation among residents is not enough to overcome the escalating pressures facing these neighborhoods, she said. “We can no longer sit by and expect Grandmont Rosedale to take care of itself.”

Potential solutions, however, like Mayor Dave Bing’s proposal to use incentives to encourage people to concentrate in a smaller number of healthy neighborhoods, are still mostly abstractions.

So it falls to people like Charles Pruitt to keep the neighborhood feeling like a neighborhood. On an island of grass at the center of a tree-lined boulevard, he was tending a small public garden in the cold this week, clearing dead foliage to make room for the flowers already emerging from the cold soil.

“Any direction you point, you can go find homes that are empty or demolished or burned,” said Mr. Pruitt, 79, a retired high school counselor who moved here a decade ago. “The city is down, but this neighborhood is surviving. And people here care.”

And it falls to people like William Young Jr., 65, a retired Army sergeant whose anger about a

break-in at his house prompted him to attend a police training program for citizen volunteers.

During his weekly shift patrolling the neighborhood this month, he discovered a young man trying to force his way into a neighbor's house. Mr. Young pulled his gun and ordered the man to lie on the ground until the police arrived.

"I live here. There's nowhere I'm going to go. So I have to help," he said. "I want there to be something left for the next generation, because this is one of the last nice neighborhoods in the city of Detroit."

And if falls to people like Tom Goddeeris, a resident who leads the nonprofit Grandmont Rosedale Development Corporation, which has been using donations and grant money to buy vacant properties, rehabilitate them and sell them — typically at a loss — to protect against the decay that follows emptiness and neglect.

"We're a neighborhood that can recover and return to stability," he said. "You can't say that about the rest of the city."

The many forces behind Detroit's shrinking population are well known by now: the decline of the auto industry, the high taxes and insurance, the troubled schools, the concerns about crime. Even here, they were too much for some.

Beverly Jones, 48, a director of day care at a Baptist church, decided to move to the suburbs almost two years ago. She gave up on Grandmont Rosedale after her house was broken into for the fifth time and her son, who happened to be there, shot one of the burglars.

The decision to leave the city where she had lived her entire life, and where she still works, was made easier because her house was in foreclosure. After she left, it sold for $9,000, a little more than a tenth of what she paid for it a decade earlier.

"It was time to go," Ms. Jones said.