



Storied history, uncertain future for Rutger Park

Historic district in time of transition

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UTICA — An afternoon stroll down Rutger Street is a reminder of the city's former grandeur, its challenges and its potential.

A couple sits and watches the newly fixed centerpiece fountain at Rutger-Steuben Park.

At the Rescue Mission of Utica, crews renovate one of its homes for rehabilitation programs.

And then there are the mid-19th century homes that make up a recognized historic district – some are still as stately as they were when the street housed Utica's "rich and famous," as described by city Mayor David Roefaro. Others, however, have been chopped up into apartments by landlords and rented out. A few appear in various stages of disrepair.

It makes for a complicated relationship between the neighborhood's stakeholders, all of whom face an uncertain future.

Among them:

- **Preservationists:** The Landmarks Society of Greater Utica purchased 1 and 3 Rutger Park for \$325,000 in June 2008. The society has been working since then to restore the two spacious structures and turn them into mansion-museums. Progress is slow, but the first exhibit might be mounted within a year. On Saturday, the Swancott Home was sold at auction to two unidentified men for \$66,000. It is the third structure within Rutger Park, and its fate could affect the Landmarks Society's plans.
- **Homeowners:** A number of the historic homes on and about Rutger Street have been purchased and turned into owner-occupied, single-family living spaces. Residents like Nick Sbarra and Michael Rizzo purchased their homes on the hope that the neighborhood would turn around – and have been disappointed that it hasn't yet.
- **Rescue Mission:** Since the Rescue Mission moved to the neighborhood in 1971, it has bought up homes and expanded its operations. The group's executive director, the Rev. William Dodge, says the restored homes have contributed to historic revitalization efforts – but others counter that the mission's presence is a detriment that's scared off development. In fact, one resident has become so frustrated with the nonprofit agency's approach to the neighborhood that he recently filed notice against City Hall for not enforcing zoning regulations regarding the Rescue Mission.
- **New neighbors:** A multicultural organization is working to purchase the one building in the neighborhood that clearly isn't historic – the gleaming former Teamsters building.
- **Renters:** And then there are the renters, who have become an undeniable part of the neighborhood fabric. They include Stephanie Brantley, who rents an apartment at 318 Rutger St. for \$500 per month.

Brantley likes the neighborhood because she doesn't have a car and it is an easy walk downtown or to bus routes.

"This isn't a bad area right here," Brantley said from the porch of an attractive and old brick home. "People try to keep up the maintenance on their lawns and homes."

But she plans to move, citing the old home's high electricity bills – most in excess of \$300 per month.

The road ahead

At the center of hopes for Rutger Street are the two mansions owned by the Landmarks Society at 1 and 3 Rutger Park -- one of which was home to powerful 1870s U.S. Sen. Roscoe Conkling. The purchases were made via grants from the Community Foundation of Herkimer & Oneida Counties, the Preservation League of New York and the city.

More recently, the Landmarks Society won a \$600,000 grant from the state Environmental Protection Fund to help with the rehabilitation of the buildings. There's a significant catch though: The funds require a local match, meaning the society must come up with one dollar to get one from the state.

Given the state's budgetary situation, the status of the grant is not entirely certain, Landmarks Society President Michael Bosak said. And fundraising efforts in Utica are an uphill battle. In the meantime, money is being spent on things like roof repairs, he said.

He acknowledged it would be a long, incremental process, but said he hopes displays about the history of the homes will be up within the year.

“We’re all volunteer,” he said of the organization. “Everybody’s holding on to jobs. This stuff doesn’t happen quickly.”

Everybody from city officials to local residents acknowledge that Rutger Park is a key to helping the neighborhood flourish. Among that group is Nick Sbarra, who has owned a mansion at the corner of Rutger Street and Brinckerhoff Avenue for about 33 years.

Sbarra is cynical about the lack of effort over the years by the city to help the neighborhood and says the Rescue Mission should not expand further than it already has. In his 33 years on Rutger Street, he said he’s watched the neighborhood become moderately safer and much more diverse.

He is a case study of the kind of person everybody agrees is needed in the neighborhood: enthusiastic about urban living, dedicated to his city. He believes the middle-class flight to the suburbs created a false stigma about the city’s safety.

“I think buying this house was one of the best things I’ve ever done,” he said. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get the investment back, but in the same sense, it’s been a pretty great place to live.”

Mayor David Roefaro said people who’ve invested in the neighborhood, people like Sbarra, make him hopeful for the future there.

“We want to see the grandeur of what the mansions once were brought back to light,” he said. “I think it can be done and is being done, actually.”

Group buying Teamsters building

And right next door, Michael Cancilla is planning to add another chapter to the street’s history. Cancilla, who purchased the handsome, glass Teamsters building several years ago for roughly \$150,000, is now planning to sell the building at a much-reduced price to the NIA Group of Utica, a community organization.

He would not specify the price.

That group, headed by Cornhill resident Kay Lanaux, has stated plans to begin a business incubator for minorities and women, a multicultural art and history museum dedicated to the city’s diversity, and youth, child and senior programs.

The reason for the sale, Cancilla says, is that he could not attract renters and had grown weary of the monthly tax payments.

“I think nobody is looking for rental space in downtown Utica,” Cancilla said. “Everybody’s got vacancies.”

City Community Revitalization Director Robert Sullivan said the entire neighborhood is on the National Register for Historic Places – and thus eligible for tax credit financing available at the state and local levels.

And he pointed out there have been successes in attracting developers, such as Bob and Alice Donnelly. The couple, originally from California, restored a mansion right across from Rutger Park and is currently working on two homes near the corner of Hopper Street and Park Avenue.

“I think there’s proof that if you do a nice product, you can attract nice and respectable people to the neighborhood,” Sullivan said of development efforts.

Tensions abound

And yet, Sullivan called the Rescue Mission the “800-pound elephant in the room” because of the controversy it has caused in recent years.

The mission said it has taken an entrepreneurial spirit to its goal of helping the needy – including the renovation and maintenance of several historic homes.

“The mission has consistently contributed to the neighborhood and we will continue to do so,” Dodge said.

But that spirit has grated on neighbors and preservationists, and none more so than Michael Rizzo, who lives across the street from the Rutger Park mansions.

Rizzo has made numerous legal filings involving the mission, mostly claiming that it has violated zoning codes and city laws in its various expansions. His most recent filing was a notice of claim on April 30, against the city, for damages, saying it has not enforced the alleged violations.

“I don’t think the neighborhood has a future if the Rescue Mission is allowed to build a halfway prison, which they are doing unlawfully right now,” Rizzo said.

Rizzo has had some success in opposition to the Rescue Mission. It was his objections that led to the city’s Zoning Board of Appeals rejecting the mission’s plans for Swancott Home -- plans that included a 20-bed facility for men recovering from substance abuse.

The zoning board also determined that the Residential Stabilization Program at 202-203 Rutger St. -- a program Rizzo brought to light -- violated codes laws. The Rescue Mission has since appealed the zoning board’s decision to state Supreme Court.

Rizzo isn’t alone.

Bosak said he respects the mission’s goal but believes its growth in the neighborhood should be stopped. Bosak said the mission’s presence creates a negative perception of the area.

“It’s just not a great growth industry for Utica, and if it continues to grow, it’s going to really impact that area coming back,” he said.

Dodge takes an entirely different view of the relationship between the Rescue Mission and the neighborhood. They are not at odds, he says, but rather complements to each other.

“I really don’t think there’s a disparity between historic preservation and the folks that we serve,” he said. “You can just look at our buildings and see that we’re able to do both.”

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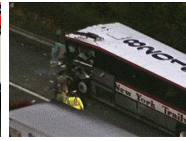
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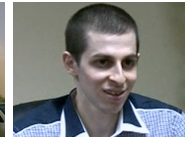
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