

Presentation to the Westside Optimists Club, Thursday, March 10, 2011  
By Fred Padget, President, Westside Improvement Association, Inc.

### **SHORT BIO:**

Born and raised on a farm in Canton Michigan. Lived and worked in 11 different states and 15 different towns/cities including Evansville from the mid 70's to the mid 80's and moving back to Evansville after retiring from Arch Mineral Corporation in 1995. Five children, ten grandchildren, three of whom have served our country in the military and two great-grandchildren. Earned a BBA from the University of Pittsburgh and an MBA from the University of Evansville. Worked in various management positions with most of my career being in financial management positions for various manufacturing and coal companies although I did spend 2 years as a local union president with the United Steelworkers of America. Served in the U.S. Army Nike Guided Missile Battalion.

### **HISTORY of WIA:**

The Westside Improvement Association is incorporated as a 501-C-3 not-for-profit organization. During 1976, Evansville and Vanderburgh County were faced with questions of strengthening infrastructure, residential and commercial development, and intelligent growth - much like today. That summer a group of individuals, many of whom I'm sure you know including Shirley James, Doris Eicher, Bonnie Kolb, Bill Harty, Paul Harper and others, along with the Westwood Garden Club, the Audubon Society and Operation City Beautiful, the forerunner of KEB, came together and formed the Westside Improvement Association.

### **BOUNDARIES:**

Our boundary to the East is Fulton Avenue North to Diamond, Diamond West to St. Joe and St. Joe North to the Gibson County line. The boundary to the North is the Gibson County line and to the West, the Posey County line. We are bordered on the South by the Ohio River. As you can see, we cover most of Western Vanderburgh County, a large territory, and we try to be responsive to all of it.

Occasionally we are viewed as a neighborhood association and we certainly take no offense to that. However, as you can see we cover much too large an area to be an effective neighborhood association and that was not the original intent and purpose of our organization. On the other hand, we encourage the creation and existence of neighborhood organizations within our boundaries. We always stand ready to help any group of neighbors who may want to establish a neighborhood association.

### **MISSION:**

More than a 1/3 of a century has passed since our inception and the WIA still works to improve the quality of life for those who live, work, or attend school on Evansville's west side. In my opinion, our Mission Statement remains timeless and as relevant today as it was during our formative years. The mission of the WIA is "to exert influence upon public and private sectors to accomplish those objectives which will enhance the natural environment of the west side of Vanderburgh County, and serve the common good of the residents".

### **SUPPORT AND OPPOSE:**

I'm often asked about what we support and, on some occasions, have been told empathetically, we "are against everything". In fact, we support the natural environment and beauty of the West Side, the health and safety of all residents, students and workers of the West Side. We support sound, planned and well-done development as needed for the benefit

of the West Side while encouraging the reuse of empty properties. We support good roads, highways and sound traffic planning that allow for safe, efficient travel. We support clean air, water and prudent environmental standards while increasing and enhancing recreational activities. We support cooperation among citizens, government, law enforcement, education, and others for the betterment of the area. We support the laws, regulations, permitting processes and other legal requirements of living and enjoying this area we love so much. We support our local government leaders in proper and professional discharge of their responsibilities. We support many things.

The number of things we oppose are relatively small. We oppose unplanned growth, development that destroys the natural environment while adding nothing to our quality of life, growth that cannot be supported by existing infrastructure, degradation of the environment and those that disregard rules, regulations and laws under which we live.

### **PHILOSOPHY:**

One important point I want to make today is that we, the WIA, believe in being active, vocal and persistent about those things we support **and** those things we find objectionable. But we always try to present our case respectfully, factually and with an open mind for the opinions of others. We will be forceful but respectful.

### **INVOLVEMENT:**

In carrying forth our mission, we are very proud of our scholarship program that provides two \$1,000 scholarships each year to local graduating high school seniors. This past year's winner of the Farmer Family Scholarship was Jonathon Merkel from Reitz High School and the Mater Dei High School winner of the Paul Harper Scholarship was Kasey Polk. Both excellent, well-rounded students.

We also provide 5 scholarships to the Burdette Summer Day Camp each year and generally recognize outstanding civic or community leaders at our annual meeting/banquet.

Along with many neighborhood organizations, we participate in the National Night Out Against Crime sponsored by the Evansville Police Department which general rates well nationally. The event takes place each year on the first Tuesday of August and we are proud to be a part of it.

Hopefully most of you are familiar with our Adopt-A-Spot beautification project at St. Joe and West Maryland Street. We started that a few years ago and it looks pretty good though spring and summer months. This year you may have noticed we've taken down some trees bordering the fire house and will replace them with a better species this spring. We have worked with KEB and the city arborist on this project. We have some bigger plans for that corner but that's a couple of years off. Hopefully we can announce something in the next year or so.

### **SOME HISTORY:**

WIA was instrumental in the development of the Howell Park Wetland now under the auspices of Wessleman Woods Nature Preserve. The protection and creation of wetlands often invoke some negative feelings. But wetlands serve important purposes such as habitat for wildlife, and serving as a water filter and purifier. An argument we often hear is that wetlands

are havens for mosquito populations. This is not true if the wetland is maintained and performing as it should. It's sad to note that Indiana has lost nearly 90% of its' wetlands in the last century.

The WIA was involved, along with others, in the creation of the Wabash Avenue of Flags that is now maintained by the Wabash Avenue of Flags Foundation. This foundation was formed by Westside Improvement and is comprised of members from the neighborhood, Westwood Garden Club, the VFW Post 1114, and the business community. I remember when I first moved to the west side and what a good feeling it was seeing the Wabash Avenue of Flags for the first time. I'm not ashamed to say it made my spine tingle.

Sometime ago and in partnership with the Western Terrace Neighborhood Association, we were able to acquire and protect nearly 3 acres of wooded land to be preserved as a natural park for the neighborhood. The land was turned over to the Wabash Heritage Land Trust Foundation so that future generations can enjoy the green space.

Most areas developed or being developed on the West Side see our involvement in some manner at some time. There are many examples that I could tell you about but the following represent much of what we are about.

We were heavily involved the student housing project Eagle Village which we still feel is not appropriate for that specific area but from all recent reports I have, it seems to be serving a purpose and has been quite respectful of the near-by neighbors. At least most of the time.

The "new" Wal-Mart and most of Pearl Drive saw a lot of activity from us with some successes and some not so successful efforts. At the present time we are very concerned about the retention pond between Home Depot and the theater. Several beaver have made it home and are destroying the integrity of the structure. We are working with the County Engineer, the County Surveyor and others to solve the problem.

We spent much effort working on the Carpentier Creek Pavilion area where Kohl's is located to protect the stream, some wetlands and the character of that area. In the last few days much of that area has been put up for Sherriff's sale and Kohl's is apparently having a problem getting clear title. The area has not been maintained as directed by either IDEM or DNA. We have copies of some of the original agreements and, Mike Lockard, our Land Use Chair, just this week was in Indianapolis to meet with those groups and get copies of the agreements for the maintenance of that area. I've not seen them yet and don't know where it will lead but we will be involved in helping to improve the upkeep, appearance and integrity of that area.

I'm sure most of you know the name Majestic Place. This was a proposed development of about 220 acres located on the west side of University Parkway between Middle Mt. Vernon and Hogue Road. Heavy commercial development was planned for about 110 acres of the total 220 acre project. That was about 1½ times the size of Eastland Mall in terms of acres and would have been detrimental to other existing commercial areas such as Franklin Street, North Park, Pearl Drive and potentially Eastland Mall. During the process we also talked about larger buffer zones, increased set-backs, a frontage road, low impact development and many other things that should be considered. But our bottom line was that this large commercial development was not needed and, worse, would have a detrimental impact on many other current commercial areas causing even more vacant buildings to sit idle. The

project was withdrawn but something will be back. We hope and will work for it to be a good project.

A few weeks ago, a Special Use request was presented to the Board of Zoning Appeals by one of the businesses located on W. Franklin Street for an electronic message sign. This area roughly bounded by Iowa and Illinois Streets and, Wabash Avenue and St. Joe is known as the Independence Historic District and was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1982. The National Register of Historic Places is the Nation's official list of cultural resources worthy of preservation. Authorized under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the National Register is part of a national program to coordinate and support public and private efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect our historic and archeological resources. That area is also listed in the Indiana Register of Historic Sites and Structures.

The WIA was opposed to an electronic message board in a historic district. We joined with the President of the Preservation Alliance of Evansville and spoke in opposition to this request at the BZA meeting. I'll not cover all testimony other than to say 3 very recent examples were pointed out where major cities were in the process of prohibiting electronic message signs in historic districts because they were felt to be completely inappropriate for those type areas. Additionally, our Zoning Code lists 6 criteria to be considered when making a decision concerning a Special Use. The proposed project clearly did not meet at least 4 of the required criteria. And while it's very rare that electronic message boards are not approved, off hand I'm hard pressed to think of more than one or two although there may be more, we did prevail.

As was pointed out in our testimony, we are not opposed to electronic message signs when they are reasonable for the area. In fact, they are very helpful to gas stations and other businesses in making price changes for example. No one has to climb the ladder or use a long pole in the rain to change the price or message. They just do it from their computer or control device. And many are hardly noticeable; CVS at Red Bank and Lloyd, and Walgreens on St. Joe come to mind. Many are a great improvement over signs that become dilapidated or in disrepair. On the other hand, some are beyond obnoxious and even create safety hazards for drivers. What we currently do not have and is needed is some definition of electronic message signs, some standards for motion or flashing as well as brightness or intensity along with what's appropriate for residential areas, if at all, high commercial areas, mixed use areas and a host of other matters need definition.

We know change and development is going to happen. We want some say in how it is done. That can only happen when lines of communication with our governmental agencies, developers and other community leaders are open. We work very hard at keeping those lines of communication open and staying informed and involved.

**FUNDING:**

Funding for our activities is primarily from food booth activities at the West Side Nut Club Fall Festival (we have some really good stuffed baked potatoes, Italian sausage sandwiches, egg rolls and lemon shakeups). Stop by this year, say hi and try one of each or more. You'll find us next to the Pet Food Center and I promise you'll enjoy it. In addition we also receive funding from dues and occasional contributions.

## **CONCERNS:**

The concerns of the WIA are probably closely aligned with most of your concerns.

With the current rate of development on the West Side we are as concerned about good and proper land use as ever. Unplanned urban sprawl is detrimental to the environment, generally comes with a net negative tax flow, does not have the proper infrastructure to support it and is an inefficient and unwise use of our very limited nature resources.

It is difficult for me to see how this area intends to support the current rate of development activity, especially commercial development, when, according to census information, population in the city has been declining since 1960. In fact, the city population has declined every census period since 1960 and is continuing to decline. There are many things proposed or in process to help reverse that trend. And we hope they work but we'll leave that argument for another time. On the other hand Vanderburgh County is continuing to increase, although slightly. Of course we are a regional economy today and that complicates this rather simplistic analysis. Evansville is the hub of a large surrounding area. Never-the-less local property taxes and user fees support a great deal of the infrastructure and I see that as a serious concern.

Another concern is the out migration of our bright young people. I don't have statistics to verify it but the fact seems generally accepted that we are losing our young, educated young people to other areas. We do know from the 2000 Census that 63 percent of Vanderburgh High School seniors said they were going into a four year program after high school but only 19 percent of adults over 25 in Vanderburgh County have a bachelor degree or higher. That is lower than the state as a whole and, to make things worse, Indiana rates low in comparison to the United States average of 26 percent. To counteract that migration we need well paying, high tech, challenging jobs for them. But just as important we need a quality of life suitable to the young person's interest. That includes good parks, entertainment, a youth friendly environment and fun things to do. At my age I can see some conflict there but I believe it's an adjustment I'll have to make.

Protection and improvement of many environmental factors is also a concern. We need clean air, clean water, good rivers, proper drainage and protection of our soils. This, of course, also helps to improve the quality of life and is one step toward keeping our young people in the area.

## **THE FUTURE:**

What does our future hold? I don't know but I do believe in the future of Evansville, Vanderburgh County and the surrounding area for one very important reason. People. This area is abundant with good, hard working, intelligent and resourceful people. We will figure a way to a great future. And, along with all the WIA members, I'm proud to be a part of the success of this area.

I appreciate your invitation and thank you for allowing me to speak with you today.

And do check us out at our web site [www.westsideimprovement.org](http://www.westsideimprovement.org) and on face book.