

COMMUNITY NEWS & EVENTS

St. Johns Main Street Beginnings Part 1: A Grassroots Endeavor

By Barbara Quinn

It was in 2008 as the economy was beginning to sputter and slow that St. Johns community activists and business owners first began meeting to discuss a Main Street program. There were problems that needed confronting. Dotted along Lombard vacant and neglected storefronts stood starkly haunted and dark, often with street drinkers curled up in shadowy doorways as evening fell. Pedestrians were often startled by sudden movements and smells. Store buildings once thriving and lively in their 1950's heyday had begun to reflect the slump of the 70's and 80's with peeling paint, broken windows, and general malaise. In the 80's slump, the entire 11-blocks of N. Lombard was deserted, dark and gloomy by 6pm with the exception of the bars. There was practically no place to get food that wasn't a bar and no positive street life. There were open drug deals. It was a bit scary to walk your dog in the business district in the evening. When one local developer enticed Starbucks to open a store on Lombard, people thought he was crazy and that it couldn't survive.

But by 2007-8, brave entrepreneurs had staked claim to storefronts and new creative enterprises had forged a stable presence and attracted residents' notice and loyalty. There was Anna Banana's, It's a Dog's Life, Blue Moon Camera, Tre Bone, and others. Some longtime businesses

had persevered through it all and continued to thrive, but there were still vacancies, negative activities, neglected storefronts.

The St. Johns Lombard Plan had just been completed a few years prior and brought more awareness about the potential for development, the positive "bones" of the Main Street, N. Lombard, its designation as "pedestrian district" and "town center." At the time new investment was only a distant dream. Up to then, practically the only development concepts proffered were concentrated low-income housing located in the town center. Those tended to be controversial and were rejected by the community.

Now with the Plan in place, activists and business owners gathered to talk about how a Main Street project, sponsored by the city, might serve to attract more stores, help stabilize the businesses we had, preserve town center character, create an attractive destination, develop better safety, as well as promote a better image for the neighborhood. Chief organizers of the informal grassroots gathering were, Robin Plance of SJNA, and Ryan Diebert and Lorelei Jutenen, SJNA land use chairs. Participants included Sarah Anderson of Anna Banannas, Carol Ellis of Tre Bone, myself and many others who met over coffee at Angel's Ladybug Organic Cafe to discuss a plan. We learned that the "Main Street Approach advocates a return to community self reliance and local empowerment. The organizational



model is based on building broad based community support and tapping the collective wisdom of partners, with volunteers serving on a Board of Directors, and four committees: • Design, • Economic Development, • Promotion and • Organization" (Portland Main Street Design Handbook, pg. 2, pdc.us).

All local advocates expressed a strong desire to preserve and enhance the historic character of the town center while encouraging investment. Communities generally go in one of two directions real estate-wise, either toward improvement or decay. The Main Street program offered a way to move in a positive direction while maintaining St. Johns' control through local board members—something that was extremely important to the advocates.

In 2009, community advocates were elated to learn that St. Johns was chosen for a Main Street designation in a competitive process. The achievement was due to hard work in convincing city partners of local support and potential, It

was one of three new Main Streets prioritized based not only on local interest and potential, but lagging commercial investment and a higher concentration of minority-owned or neighborhood-serving businesses. Along with St. Johns, NE Alberta, Hillsdale were chosen.

Many positive things have happened in the town center since then. How has the program affected the neighborhood? How has the vision and mission of the St. Johns Main Street project changed since 2009? Part 2 to be continued in the next issue of the St. Johns Review. For more information see:

stjohnsmainstreet.org.

Answers to Puzzle on Page 7

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LOCAL OPPORTUNITIES & EVENTS

St. Johns Volunteer Fair to connect residents with local volunteer opportunities

The 2nd annual St. Johns Volunteer Fair is set for Thursday, February 4 from 6pm-8pm at Los Prados Event Hall, 10105 N. Lombard. This free, family-friendly event, hosted by St. Johns Main Street and the St. Johns Neighborhood Association, will give community members the opportunity to learn about a diverse array of local volunteer opportunities. Childcare will be provided, along with live music, kid's activities, free snacks and a raffle. Community groups and nonprofits can register for a table to share their volunteer needs and the great work they do through this short online form <http://goo.gl/forms/fpzpXm87dB> or by calling 503-841-5522.

Lead Poisoning Prevention Workshop with Community Energy Project

Feb. 16, 2016 from 7-8pm
St. Johns Community Center: Room 1
8427 N Central St, Portland, OR 97203

North Portland has some of the highest concentrations of older housing stock that may have been painted with lead paint. This free workshop will discuss the health effects and common sources of lead exposure, basic prevention measures, and resources for additional

help to eliminate lead poisoning. Eligible participants receive free kits of lead poisoning prevention materials, including lead-safe cleaning supplies and testing materials. For more information, call Ryan at 503-284-6827 x109.

Send community meetings, workshops, and other free events to the Review at:

reviewnewspaper@gmail.com

If the event is free and open to the public, so is the announcement.

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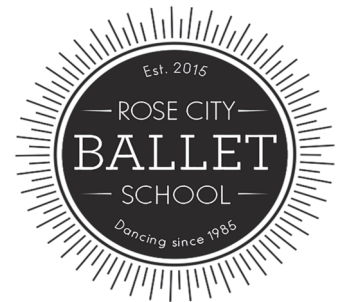
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By Kay - the Light Bulb Lady

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