

KENTON NEIGHBORHOOD

A Brief History of Kenton

By DAVID MYERS-EATWELL

Very few areas of Oregon exemplify the wide scope of Northwest history as well as Kenton. At different times it has been home to the Wa-kan-is-sis-se Indian tribe, owned by retired U.S. cavalymen, old growth forest, and the primary ferrying point between Oregon and Washington. During its heydays, dust from Eastern

Oregon's cattle range mixed in the air with the sharp bouquet of sawdust. At one time the second most populace residential area in Oregon, this community

has played a vital part in the economic growth and cultural development of Portland. That role is reflected in the architecture of the homes and public buildings of the old Kenton community.

In 1906 Swift Meat Company bought the Union Meat Company, planning to consolidate its regional facilities in North Portland. Swift formed the Kenwood Land Company, buying 3,400 acres on the Columbia River to layout a new meat packing plant near its Union Stockyards and build a company town (Kenton) on the gentle rise overlooking the flood plain.

The \$3 million plant opened in 1909 and employed 1,500 workers, most of whom rode the Kenton Traction Company trolley from their homes in blossoming town of Kenton. The extensive facility made Portland the dominant livestock market on the West Coast by 1911.

Kenton developed as the place where industrial and commercial development can work together with neighborhood interests an exemplary way. All of the basic resources remain in place. As one walks north along Denver Avenue from Lombard, a 5-minute stroll passes through medium density residential area, an historic design zone overlaying a commercial-retail district, major rail and trucking routes, a wetlands natural resource area, and the site of the single largest annual event in Portland, the Rose Cup car races.

Since 1993, the Kenton Action Plan has concentrated on the livability of the Kenton Neighborhood and building partner-

ships within the local community. Having met the major goals in those plans, the Kenton Action Plan has turned its focus to economic redevelopment of Kenton's retail district along Denver Avenue and the industrial sanctuary along Columbia Boulevard. A vibrant future depends on recreating Kenton's past.

Construction of light rail with a station adjacent to the Kenton Business District would have three added impacts:

1. Stimulation of additional development in the area;
2. Up-zoning of some areas to high-density multi-family residential; and
3. Potential availability of remnant right-of-way parcels for redevelopment.

Light rail could add up to 150 residences, 620 jobs and 462,000 square feet of commercial/industrial space to the Kenton Business District by the year 2015.

Who is the Kenton Action Plan?

In December of 1990, representatives from four North Portland Neighborhoods (Kenton, Portsmouth, Cathedral Park and St. Johns) initiated the North Portland Revitalization Project. The Target Area was bordered by Columbia Boulevard on the north, Lombard on the south, Fenwick on the east and Peninsular on the west, but was extended to include the Columbia Boys and Girls Club on N. Emerald.

The Plan had five primary goals:

A. Promote community empowerment and foster community pride through increased citizen and business involvement and cooperation, while furthering the development of the historic business district.

B. Facilitate a safe and secure neighborhood and business district, perceived as free, and indeed, free of crime and drug/alcohol related problems.

C. Facilitate an attractive and clean neighborhood, free from abandoned/inappropriately parked vehicles, debris, and other nuisances, while making the neighborhood pedestrian friendly and appealing to home owners.

D. Facilitate a viable and attractive business district, serving local needs, providing a focal point, and encouraging new business to locate in the area.

E. Promote and/or establish programs to serve the needs of youth, children and seniors, plus assist adults with job training/placement.

The 60-block segment of the Kenton Neighborhood (N. Fenwick west to N. Peninsular, N. Lombard north to N. Columbia) was selected as a target area because it includes a once vibrant business district and a primarily blue-collar residential community. Since completion of Interstate 5 in the early 1960's, major traffic and business focus shifted away from Interstate Avenue and the Kenton Business District. The Kenton community fell into a period of decline that carried into the 1990's.

On the positive side, behind the dumpsters on the sidewalk and the soaped storefront windows are commercial buildings of some historic significance that are structurally sound and in step with 2040 plans for increased population density. A number of the buildings were designed for combined residential and commercial usage when trolleys ruled the streets. A coordinated program to draw public and private development dollars into the business district will add affordable housing and employment opportunities to the Kenton community.

The surrounding residential area meets target area standards. The needs of the community are diverse. Single-family housing exhibits a comparatively high ratio of rentals to owner-occupied homes. More than 63% of the homes

were built before 1949. Old houses in Kenton are often inhabited by elderly residents. This old, but affordable, housing also draws young families to Kenton.

The last census set 24+% of Kenton's population as non-white. Yet, since its charter in 1986, a non-

white has yet to sit on the neighborhood board. Though Kenton has garnered a reputation for projects and activism on abatement issues, it still has a way to go toward developing a citizenry involved in visualizing the future Kenton and bringing that vision to fruition.



Photo: M. Washington

Long ago, cowboys stayed a few days in Kenton. It was built to look like an Eastern Oregon town. The roads of the business district are wide because it was designed for cattle drives to the stockyards. Kenton progressed to become the city largest city in Portland.

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