

1997 NEIGHBORHOOD OF THE YEAR

Kenton Seeks Return To Good Old Days

By LEE PERLMAN

Kenton is an historic community that was left behind by the forces that created it.

It is also a community that is working hard to preserve the best of the past, dispose of the bad and seize the future.

The Swift meat packing operations, creator of the old town of Kenton and at one point employer of 70 percent of its residents, closed down in 1965, and the shipyard and lumber mills that accounted for much of the rest gradually left or cut back. Nor is it the transportation hub that it once was, as the opening of the I-5 Freeway turned North Interstate Avenue from a main highway into a byway. According to David Myers-Eatwell of the Kenton Action Plan, the neighborhood has lost 12 percent of its population since 1970.

Meanwhile, some less positive aspects of the neighborhood's past remained. Long a "watering hole" for both cowboys driving herds to the stockyards and sailors of ships being repaired, Kenton's small business district had 12 taverns, some of them less than well run. Perhaps fed by such bars and their patrons, the neighborhood as a whole had more than its share of crime problems.

Slowly but surely, however, the neighborhood has fought to restore itself. Through the Albina Community Plan of 1993, part of the neighborhood was designated an Historic Conservation District, encouraging property owners to preserve the distinctive fake stone, cast concrete buildings originally built by Swift. One such structure, the Kenton Hotel, once slated for demolition, was acquired by John Condon in

1992 and restored after many years of effort; today it houses the Kenton Station restaurant on the ground floor and housing on upper stories. The neighborhood is now seeking a national Historic District designation, Myers-Eatwell says.

In another direction, the Kenton Action Plan, in cooperation with the Portland Bureau of Buildings, conducted a series of Code Enforcement Sweeps. Building inspectors, who typically respond to specific complaints, moved through part of Kenton

and systematically cited "nuisance" violations such as overgrown lawns, derelict cars left on the street and old appliances left in yards. The action not only dramatically improved the appearance of the area, but had a strong

effect on criminal activity, Myers-Eatwell says. "People who commit these kinds of violations tend not to care much about the law in general," he says. "The enforcement forced them to move somewhere else."

Myers-Eatwell says he received some

angry calls at first, but that by year's end the only complaints were from people who wanted to know why THEIR street wasn't being swept. One car owner said he was cited, but was still grateful for the general improvement.

Other accomplishments and activities in Kenton include:

Neighbors Between the Rivers, founded in 1986, with the largest circulation of any Portland independently-produced neighborhood newsletter at 19,000. It includes news of the entire peninsula, but is produced mostly by Kenton volunteers.

A history of the neighborhood compiled by lifelong resident Alta Mitchoff.

Restoration of Kenton's best-known landmark, the Paul Bunyon statue at the North Denver and Interstate Avenue intersections, and replacement of an unsightly lot by a rose garden planted by Mitchoff.

Annual street fairs, more recently replaced by annual Small Craft Regattas that introduce the public to the natural beauties of the Columbia Slough.

Efforts to acquire a 2.2 acre park along the slough.

Successful efforts to block the siting of a new jail, and a proposed 19,000-seat amphitheater, in Portland International Raceway.

Such efforts earned Kenton the Mayor's Spirit of Portland award as Portland Neighborhood of the Year in 1997.

There is more general support for

a light rail line; the Kenton Association has strongly supported the regional project for years. "It would go a long way toward showing that this is a really nice area that the rest of the city has overlooked," Arden says. Don Arambula, the current Kenton Association chair adds that it would provide residents a transportation alternative to local traffic congestion, which is likely to get progressively worse.

It would also be a return to Kenton's historic past, Myers-Eatwell says. The Swift Company built a light rail line to transport its workers, thinking that few would ever own motor cars.

Despite continuing problems and issues, neighbors agree Kenton is a community that is changing for the better, or perhaps returning to happier times. "In the last ten years things have improved quite a bit," Johnson says. "What used to be a whole bank of bars is now a laundromat, a church and a store. I'm no longer nervous about being here at 10 o'clock at night."

Mills, a real estate agent, says more homeowners, including first time home buyers are moving in. "We no longer have to step over drunks or listen to loud stereos at night," he says. "We have the peace and quiet that other parts of the city take for granted."



Photo: M. Washington

The anticipated North-South light rail line proposed by Tri-Met will run through the Kenton neighborhood and connect with Portland International Airport - completing the loop through Gateway in Southeast Portland.



Photo: M. Washington

This mansion was built by David Cole, a hardware store owner, for his wife. His wife was the grand-daughter of Daniel Boone. In 1885 it took a whole day to drive into Portland and back by horse-and-buggy. For a long time it was known as a haunted house, or Pete's Castle, but it has been fixed up. During the Christmas holiday, the house is lit up with a million lights and open to the public for touring.

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