

History & Challenges of the Rockhill Homes Association

The document below was originally prepared for a presentation during the planning process for the Cultural Heritage District Plan, adopted by the city of Kansas City in 2012. With so many new neighbors in Rockhill, it was suggested that we share the document to enhance understanding of our current position as a neighborhood. It has been updated to reflect changes in the past few years.

- **Great Neighborhood- Great Institutions**

We are a neighborhood that understands the importance of both great neighborhoods and great institutions in making Kansas City a great city. It is a relationship that is symbiotic and where there are differences, those differences merit resolution.

- **Not Expansionist**

As a neighborhood, we are not looking to expand. There are no new housing projects planned across Rockhill Road or on undeveloped land of the Kauffman Foundation. We are protectionist and preservationist. We are an association of 100 homes and our goal is to ensure that every residential property is maintained as an owner occupied single family residence that is consistent with our zoning. We are a strong but fragile neighborhood. We have and continue to address a variety of factors that threaten the residential quality of our historic area.

- **Long History of Challenges**

- **Redlined in the 60s & 70s**

Throughout the 1960s and 70s it was very difficult to find a financial institution that would provide a loan or insurance on homes in the neighborhood. Many banks and insurance companies considered Rockhill a risky investment.

- **UMKC- (12 House or 10% of the neighborhood)**

Until the late 1990s and early 2000s, UMKC owned 12 homes in Rockhill, including all of Pierce Street. Several of the houses were institutionalized with much of their historic character removed and then used for storage and offices. With changes in the UMKC Master Plan necessitated by the UMKC Kills Neighborhoods effort, the properties were then sold to individual property owners.

- **Sailors Project**

In the late 1980s this skyscraper project was planned for the east side of the Plaza, which included buildings as high as 53 stories. With inadequate infrastructure and overbuilt density, it was defeated through a lengthy lawsuit and neighborhood opposition.

➤ **Post Office Terminal**

In the early 1990s the United States Post Office proposed a large terminal hub in the 4700 block of Oak. Through neighborhood opposition working in conjunction with U.S. Senator Eagleton, the plan was stopped. The site is the current home of KSHB, with a conference room named Rockhill in appreciation of the neighborhood.

➤ **Group Home**

In the late 1980s a large group home was proposed in the area, for which a state license had been issued. With the help of Governor Teasdale, the license was revoked and our zoning upheld.

***It is noted that, for all the efforts of the neighborhood to protect the area and residential quality from inappropriate land usage, there has been no institutional support. The institutions have remained silent and passive on all major developments and proposals in the neighborhood for the past four decades. While they have a vital interest in the quality of the neighborhoods and surrounding area, they have remained passive on all issues.**

- **Property Tax Base for Kansas City**

With a great deal of expressed concern for the residential tax base in Kansas City and decades of population exodus from the central core, Rockhill is exactly the kind of neighborhood that the City of Kansas City should be fighting very hard to protect. We are the residents and the tax payers that Kansas City needs.

- **Rockhill is the Buffer...**

As one of the most historic single family residential neighborhoods that align greater challenges to the east, Rockhill serves as the primary buffer to all areas to our west. We serve as a buffer for the Nelson, the Art Institute, the Kemper, and the Plaza. Crime statistics for the area indicate that the efforts of the neighborhood are highly effective in reducing crime when compared to other neighborhoods in the area. Through the use of a private security service and the strong sense of community in which neighbors communicate and respond to criminal activity, Rockhill has one of the lowest crime rate in all of midtown. The institutions in the neighborhood benefit from the deterrent efforts in the neighborhood.

- **We live here...**

While there are many choices for quality residential living in Kansas City, the home owners of Rockhill choose to live in a neighborhood that is diverse and aesthetically beautiful, but has daily challenges. Even with the noise of frequent sirens, the heavy traffic, and occasional criminal activity, Rockhillians have invested their money and

families in a great midtown neighborhood. We are not the individuals who work and play in Kansas City and then return to suburban communities.

- **Current Planning Concerns: Encroachment & Neighborhoods in Decline**

- **Kauffman Foundation**

As a neighborhood we have always been grateful that the property on which the Kauffman Foundation resides is our neighborhood. They partner with and support the neighborhood in several ways. We have some sense of ownership in their presence in the neighborhood, since it was our opposition that prevented UMKC from developing an industrial office park on the site several decades ago. It should also be noted that this site was once a vibrant and healthy neighborhood. Known as the Trolley Barn District, there were once hundreds of homes and neighborhood businesses that were purchased and torn down by UMKC. It is a very real example that neighborhoods can disappear.

The Kauffman Foundation purchased five houses in the neighborhood, one on Cleaver II, two on Pierce Street and two that are adjacent to their parking lot. One of the homes purchased in Rockhill was not on the market; with an offer that was not to be refused, but removed a family with children from the neighborhood. The Foundation expressed interest in additional houses, particularly on Pierce Street. They used the properties for guest quarters for Foundation visitors, but often sat vacant. While the properties were relatively well maintained, transient occupants contributed nothing to the sense of neighborhood in Rockhill. We asked the foundation not to purchase additional houses in Rockhill. With a change in leadership at the Foundation, three of the properties were sold and the two on Pierce Street were given to the Nelson, which continue to remain mostly vacant.

- **Nelson Art Museum**

Most everyone in Rockhill is aware of the encroachment intent of the Nelson-Atkins, and that we as neighborhood have waited over ten years for a still undelivered master plan. At this point in time we are left with an institution that owns seven historical residential properties in Rockhill and the Weiss-Manfredi Plan that calls for the demolition of five of those homes, including the Laura Nelson Kirkwood home and the moving of Rockhill Road. While everyone in the neighborhood speaks to the merits of such a great institution, it does not entitle the Nelson to do what they want with residential property. The same is true for **all** residential property owners in Rockhill. The Board of the Rockhill Homes Association has consistently and unanimously supported the two City plans that pertain to our neighborhood which call for no changes in zoning and the protection of our residential historic designation.

- **Troost & Neighborhoods to the East**

With the economic development challenges to the east, the Rockhill Homes Association is involved with all efforts to enhance business development and residential quality. We were represented on the Board of Brush Creek Community Partners (BCCP) for over 20 years, served on the Healthy Neighborhoods Task Force of BCCP, had committee assignments on the Manheim Historic Neighborhood Initiative, are participants of the Neighborhood Advisory Council to UMKC, and when invited, participated in the efforts of the Green Impact Zone. Most recently we were active supporters of the new Troost overlay that outlines permitted uses and design guidelines. In addition, we have had active participation in the development of the Cultural Heritage District Plan (2012), the Envisioning a Cultural District (2015) and the Midtown-Plaza Area Plan (2016). We understand the importance of not only our immediate neighborhood, but the greater community in which we reside. We have asked our neighboring institutions to provide a more active role in improving the areas to the east? With their sizable resources, they could be a catalyst for the area while not encroaching on neighborhoods. Neighborhood encroachment is an old model of buying residential properties, tearing them down and diminishing neighborhoods. It is an elitist easy low cost model of the past, taking what can be taken, what others have sought to enhance and protect. Several area institutions have implemented new models that create win-win for both an institution and its neighborhoods. We have encouraged other institutions to follow their lead.

➤ **Planning Process**

From all the plans that are on record for our neighborhood we are hopeful that the residential quality of Rockhill will be further protected against institutional encroachment. Our goal, in conjunction with other stakeholders, is to enhance the quality of urban living, protect the historic nature of the neighborhood and ensure the tax revenue for the City of Kansas City. In addition, we are hopeful that the plans will support efforts for the economic development of Troost Ave and will strengthen neighborhoods to the east.

We are grateful for the support we have received from our two City Councilwomen, the entire City Council and Mayor, and eighty-eight other neighborhood associations in strengthening residential zoning throughout the city.

Submitted by Jim Wanser on behalf of the Rockhill Homes Association