

# NEWS FROM NORTHSIDE

NEWSLETTER OF THE NORTHSIDE NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION • IOWA CITY, IOWA

## WHAT IS A FORM-BASED CODE and How Could It Benefit the Northside Neighborhood?

IN MAY, the City Council will review the City’s Strategic Plan, which prioritizes Council’s goals for the next five years. A current goal of the Plan is to “Foster Healthy Neighborhoods and Affordable Housing throughout Iowa City.” It calls for “identifying new efforts to expand and adapt the City affordable and neighborhood improvement strategies to meet the long-term needs throughout the community.”

Attracting a diverse population to the Northside by providing a mix of housing options at various levels of affordability has been a challenge, especially so in a manner compatible with the existing neighborhood character.

Using a form-based code (FBC) could help achieve the Strategic Plan’s neighborhood goals in the Northside neighborhood. As the name suggests, the purpose of a FBC is to regulate the forms of the built environment, rather than regulate and segregate uses. In fact, the Northside’s walkable, human-scaled urban character—street grid, alleys, modest block size, street-friendly housing frontages and building dimensions, mixed-uses, and public parks—exemplify the qualities that a FBC is designed to create. Codifying those qualities in a FBC, especially for housing, will ensure compliance when infill development is in the design phase.

Later this spring, the dilapidated house on the city-owned property at 724 Ronalds Street will be demolished. The property will offer an opportunity to test form-based “missing middle” housing types already found in the Northside, such as duplexes, that are “affordable by design” and energy efficient.

The resulting strategy may not require a change to the current residential zoning classifications. Rather, it could be applied as a zoning overlay (similar in concept to our historic/conservation district overlays) to the existing residential zones, and only used for infill development providing affordable or workforce housing.

John Thomas, who is District C Representative on City Council, will be asking the Council to consider the adoption of a form-based code for the Northside and possibly other core neighborhoods when they discuss the Strategic Plan on May 18th. Please contact John ([john-thomas@iowa-city.org](mailto:john-thomas@iowa-city.org)) if you have questions or comments about form-based code in Iowa City.



## Northside Advocacy Project

A FEW MONTHS AGO, several Northside neighbors began meeting to discuss what makes our neighborhood special, and to discuss some potential short- and long-term threats to the Northside’s quality of life. Those conversations resulted in a draft statement of neighborhood values and proposed actions, which were shared with the Northside Neighborhood Association email list in March, along with an invitation for your feedback.

A number of you took the time to respond to that March email, with scores of additional suggestions ranging from street improvements to incentives for property upgrades. We plan to condense these good ideas, plus findings from Professor Jerry Anthony’s class project and other research, into some proposed action steps to be presented to the City in the coming weeks. Our hope is to encourage the City’s increased investment in the Northside, keeping it safe, beautiful, walkable, affordable, and diverse. Stay tuned!

# NORTHSIDE NEIGHBORHOOD DRAFT STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

*April 1, 2002 Summary*

Iowa City's Northside neighborhood is a treasure, both in itself and for Iowa City as a whole. We Northside residents want to work with partners to confront shared challenges and make the neighborhood an even better place for all its current and future residents and businesses.

We recognize that multiple kinds of people and organizations have a stake in the neighborhood's health. These stakeholders have diverse and often conflicting interests, which affect how the neighborhood will evolve over time. This draft statement represents an early effort to articulate the interests and aspirations of residents who own and occupy homes in the neighborhood. We offer it in the hopes of stimulating discussion with other owner-occupants and subsequently working with other stakeholders to refine and solidify a unified course of action for the neighborhood.

## **The Northside Neighborhood Is a Treasure**

Located within the 1839 plat of the city, the Northside neighborhood is Iowa City's oldest intact neighborhood. Located within convenient walking distance of the downtown and the main campus of the university, the neighborhood contains features that mark it as a model for inclusive and sustainable development, including: a vibrant commercial district, a thriving and recently renovated elementary school, a mixture of housing types and costs, a significant forest canopy, medical facilities and grocery stores, and many appealing components of an attractive public realm, including North Market Square Park and many others. The neighborhood is also a valuable asset for Iowa City as a whole; for example, because its residential density is considerably higher than most other neighborhoods, its property taxes per acre are also likely to be higher.

## **The Neighborhood Faces Various Challenges**

Market forces create a financial incentive for property owners to convert existing single-family and duplex structures to rental units (especially but not exclusively) for students or else to demolish existing structures and replace them with structures housing a larger number of occupants. This market pressure drives up assessed values of property, which increases property taxes and makes the neighborhood less affordable for current and prospective owner-

occupants. The City's zoning code provides some protection against these market forces, but savvy developers know how to work around the code's restrictions. In our view, in-fill development is inevitable and welcomed if it complements the existing scale and character of the neighborhood. Yet, lot by lot, developers will continue seeking permission to construct on small lots structures which are excessively large and incompatible in scale and character with nearby buildings.

A related challenge concerns deterioration of older buildings due to mistreatment or a lack of investment in their maintenance or improvement. Some occupants can be tremendously hard on buildings. This drives up the owner's cost of routine maintenance, repair, and upkeep. Older residents who live on fixed-incomes face a different challenge. As market forces cause the assessed value of currently affordable housing to increase, such residents encounter increasing property taxes and, especially if they have low or fixed incomes, cannot afford to invest in their properties for home improvement or energy efficiency. Over time, such properties become increasingly vulnerable to purchase by investors who see opportunities to redevelop the properties.

The neighborhood's walkability also needs constant attention. For example, adverse winter weather conditions coupled with the City's snow removal practices can result in sidewalks being blocked by piles of snow and ice.

## **What We Propose**

We seek to address these challenges constructively, and to invent ways to make the neighborhood an even better place. In an effort to stimulate discussion and refinement, we propose that this effort would include the following five actions.

- Developing a clear statement of what we value,
- Revitalizing the Northside Neighborhood Association as the primary structural means of living out our values,
- Obtaining technical assistance from students at the University of Iowa,
- Urging City government to adopt and undertake complementary policies and actions, and
- Consider creating a Self-Supporting Municipal Improvement District for the neighborhood

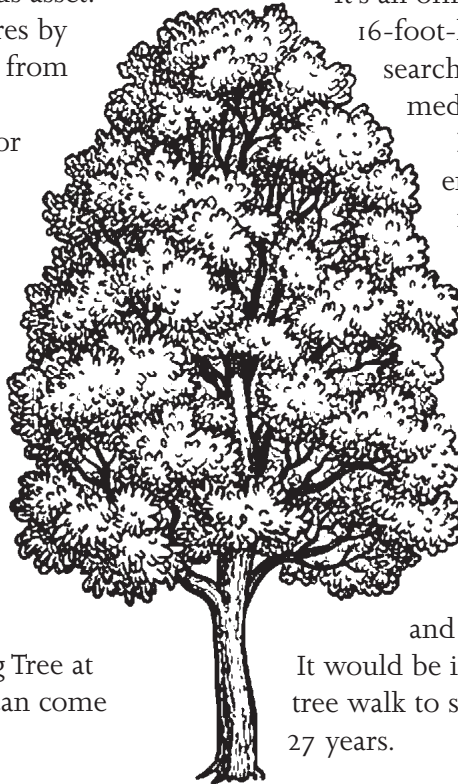
# OUR HERITAGE: Northside’s Urban Forest

The Northside’s tree canopy is a precious asset. Its shade can lower summer temperatures by up to 10 degrees. Yet it ages and suffers from storms, stress, and utility digging. Iowa City’s forestry division regularly cares for the aging tree stock and does “in-fill” tree plantings in the Northside and other vintage neighborhoods.

Do you know about the City’s **ROOT FOR TREES DISCOUNT PROGRAM**? Property owners can get vouchers usable at local nurseries for 50% off a tree. Check it out on the City’s website.

**POISON IVY** is a not-so-nice feature of living in the urban forest. It will be sprouting now and can stick out over sidewalks or make a surprise appearance in yards.

Have you seen the Iowa City Reading Tree at 312 Ronalds Street? Some good things can come out of damaged or threatened trees.



It’s an official free little library built on a 16-foot-high tree stump. Do an internet search to read all about it in local media or check on FaceBook.

In 1995, Heritage Trees enlisted volunteers from the neighborhood (and others) to document our oldest specimens. The results were compiled in a Northside tree walk brochure, now digitized on the Iowa City Public library’s website. The City of Iowa City, has since surveyed the trees using a much more modern method! It is digitized and available on the City’s website.

It would be interesting to take the 1995 tree walk to see what’s changed in the last 27 years.

## Graduate Students Conduct Northside Housing Survey

THIRTEEN GRADUATE students of the University of Iowa in Professor Jerry Anthony’s Housing Policy Spring 2022 course are working on a detailed survey of the Northside neighborhood. The survey, conducted using a custom-designed smartphone app, will document the condition of most (if not all) residential parcels in the neighborhood along these parameters: roof, siding, window & doors, painting, fencing, parking on the lot, and architectural style. The students will produce a report with maps and charts, synthesizing data collected in the survey with information from property tax records and U.S. census data. The report could be of immense value to the Northside Neighborhood residents as they deliberate on ways to improve and enhance the neighborhoods’ exquisite built form. The students will present their findings and recommendations at a public event on Monday, May 9, 2022.

The Iowa City  
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION**

has a vacancy open for a Brown Street Historic District. If you live within the shaded area (below) and are interested in serving on the commission, please go to the City of Iowa City website to apply: [www.icgov.org/city-government/boards-commissions-and-committees](http://www.icgov.org/city-government/boards-commissions-and-committees)

# Seeking Your Time & Talents!

Did you know that the Northside Neighborhood Association is one of 30 such organizations throughout Iowa City? Strong neighborhood associations help residents feel more engaged, connected, and involved in their local community. What makes a neighborhood association strong? Neighbors like YOU who volunteer your time and talents to keep us moving forward!

If you have writing, design, website development, and/or social media skills; or if you're an avid project manager, door-knocker, or herder of cats; or if you're new to the Northside and interested in meeting more of your neighbors – join our team! We're looking for folks to help revitalize the Northside Neighborhood Association by taking part in a short-term task force to advance our current priorities. You can nominate yourself or even someone you know, and we'll check with them. Just send your name(s) and contact info to: [northsideneighborhoodic@gmail.com](mailto:northsideneighborhoodic@gmail.com). Thank you!



**NORTHSIDE  
NEIGHBORHOOD  
ASSOCIATION  
Meeting**

Sunday, May 1st at 2:00 pm  
Happy Hollow Park Shelter  
Light Refreshments

This newsletter was created by the Northside Neighborhood Association and funded by the City of Iowa City's PIN grant program. If you have questions or would like to get involved in the NNA, please email [northsideneighborhoodic@gmail.com](mailto:northsideneighborhoodic@gmail.com).



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