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6— Section 1 Thursday, February 6, 1975 THE HERALD

Prospect Heights at mercy of 'neighbors'?

Many residents believe problems stem from being 'poor relative'

Tradition says Prospect Heights got its name from a combination of the names of its two neighbors — Mount Prospect and Arlington Heights.

Today, residents of the unincorporated area in Wheeling Township maintain that most of their problems stem from Prospect Heights still having to take what those powerful neighbor communities dish out.

The taking of the area's name from its neighbors has been accepted and a deep pride has been built up behind the name

Stories by Tom Von Malder

Prospect Heights. It is one of three unincorporated areas in Cook County that have a name apart from subdivision identifications.

HOWEVER, the community objects strongly to being nearly ringed by high-density apartment complexes and shopping centers and having to accept in Prospect Heights the resulting traffic, noise and pollution.

In the last decade or so, Prospect Heights' three neighbors — Arlington Heights, Mount Prospect and Wheeling — all have annexed large portions of the unincorporated area and each of the three communities has approved large apartment complexes on the periphery of Prospect Heights.

Arlington Heights allowed construction of the Brandenberry Park East apartments on Camp McDonald Road and the Morrow Store on Rand Road. Mount Prospect permitted the Colony Country project to locate hundreds of apartments and a huge water tank on the Old Orchard Golf Course property, southwest corner of Camp McDonald and Elmhurst roads. Wheeling approved apartment projects along Elmhurst Road such as The Forums and Pleasant Run.

In addition, Mount Prospect helped turn a 100-acre farm at the southeast corner of Elmhurst Road and Euclid Avenue into what was in 1963 the country's largest enclosed shopping mall — the Randhurst Shopping Center. That project caused Euclid and Elmhurst to be widened to four lanes.

BASED ON THIS past, Prospect Heights residents "fear annexation to the surrounding towns" because such annexations "erode their confidence that the open spaces will remain," said Jack Gilligan, president of the Prospect Heights Improvement Assn. The PHIA, the force for community action, dates back to at least 1959 as a civic organization.

Most residents moved to Prospect Heights because of the area's "open-ness."

"It was wide open here and I enjoyed the one-half acre or acre lots they had to offer," said Robert J. Lunaberg, who settled in Prospect Heights with his wife 16 years ago. "I hated to see Old Orchard (Country Club) go for apartments," Lunaberg added, echoing the thoughts of many other residents.

Residents of the area are particularly militant about maintaining what they describe as their "country atmosphere." Fences are few and most homeowners would fight the incursion of such "city" amenities as sidewalks and street lights.

An exception is made for safety as in the current effort by parts of the community to get sidewalks or footpaths for use by school children.

THIS WILLINGNESS to fight to maintain openness has been evident in three recent cases. Most typical has been the lawsuit by the Wheeling Road Zoning Committee, a group of homeowners. The suit tried to get Wheeling's annexation of 40 acres along Wheeling Road declared illegal and voided so apartments will not be built on the property. The home-owners lost the case, and are appealing the court decision.

Another example of the same type of fight is the PHIA's staunch opposition to plans to build thousands of apartments on the Rob Roy Golf Course east of Wheeling Road. That fight also may end up in court.

The third example is the combined efforts of the Irish Walton League and the Prospect Heights Park District to maintain the Hillcrest Slough as a nature preserve. The park district hopes to be able eventually to purchase the whole slough and currently has the south half under condemnation proceedings. Park Board Pres. Max Lyle said the owner of the south slough already has plans to fill in and develop it if the park's lawsuit fails.

WITH NO MUNICIPAL government to support them in their fights against developments, residents of Prospect Heights often feel their objections are not given sufficient consideration.

The lack of local government also hurts the community with regard to police protection — probably the second greatest area of concern among the residents.

Police protection for Prospect Heights falls to the Sheriff's Police. There is virtually no patrol of residential streets and the residents concede that patrol is just about an impossibility because of the wide area that the Sheriff's Police has to cover.

'It was wide open here and I enjoyed the half-acre lots they had to offer. I hated to see Old Orchard go for apartments...'

— Robert J. Lunaberg, 16-year resident

"I don't know if we get too much protection from the county police," Lunaberg said. Another big complaint is the slowness of Sheriff's Police in answering nonemergency calls. Gilligan said the wait has been as long as 90 minutes.

SINCE ABOUT 1970 it has generally been accepted in Prospect Heights that only two avenues remain open for the community. One is to be absorbed eventually by one or a combination of the three surrounding villages through annexations. The other is for the area to incorporate, forming a City of Prospect Heights.

Several attempts at incorporation have been made, all spearheaded by the PHIA. The most recent attempt is still the subject of pending litigation.

Gilligan, despite the past failures and the objections of the neighboring communities, thinks this is the year for incorporation. "I think the court will order a referendum. We're pretty sure of that," he said.

He sees the referendum being held in May or June and passing. Then he predicts a lively campaign will ensue for the various city government positions.

The incorporation efforts encompass most, although not all, of the Prospect Heights area. By law the area of a new town can be no greater than four square miles, so the plans call for just under that limit and include 18,613 residents.

IN 20 YEARS, the geography of the Prospect Heights area has changed considerably, with farm land being converted to homesites and apartment complexes. This 1955 photo shows the intersection of Camp McDonald and Elmhurst roads in the lower left section and goes as far north as Hintz Road.

THE SHOPPING CENTER at Elmhurst and Camp McDonald roads in Prospect Heights was the first drive-in type center in the Midwest when it opened in 1937. This 1962 photo shows the initial effects the then-new Randhurst Shopping Center had on its ancestor, less than a mile away.

Prospect Heights offers many services

It isn't your typical one-horse 'unincorporated' town

Prospect Heights is not unusual for an unincorporated area just because it has its own name and identity. It also has a park district, a post office branch and a volunteer fire department.

The fire department was started during World War II. Area Civil Defense leaders met with the Prospect Heights Lions Club, which also was instrumental in getting park facilities for the area, to raise $200 for brooms, rakes and a garden hose to use as weapons against incendiary bombs.

At the time of those discussions, Lions Club member F. E. (Fran) Poor suggested that a regular fire protection district be formed to protect the 300 homes and 1,000 residents of the Prospect Heights area.

IT TOOK WORKERS less than a day to get the necessary signatures on petitions so that a referendum could be held. The referendum passed and the Prospect Heights Rural Fire Protection District was organized Oct. 17, 1944.

The department's first piece of equipment was a 1926 Chevrolet fire truck donated by a group of community businessmen.

During the years, the department gradually grew in both manpower and equipment and on April 15, 1955, the department fought its largest fire. A blaze started in one store of the small shopping center at the northeast corner of Elmhurst and Camp McDonald roads. The blaze threatened five other stores and caused an estimated $150,000 in damage.

In the early 1960s, a number of disagreements developed between the firemen and the fire district trustees which led to the firing of Fire Chief Poor, who became chief in 1947. The move closed the fire station for three months in late spring and early summer of 1962.

DISAGREEMENTS ABOUT leases and contracts in 1961 threatened to disrupt the department's operations, in part because the fire district owned the equipment, but the firemen owned the fire station.

The 1961 situation was smoothed, but in early 1962 the district trustees fired Poor. Four refused to leave and when the firemen's association's contract with the district expired on April 30, the fire station was closed. The Mount Prospect Fire Dept. handled calls in the fire district until the dispute was resolved and the station reopened Aug. 1. The new chief was William Andrew.

Most recently, district voters approved a $275,000 referendum on May 1, 1971 to fund an addition to the Camp McDonald Road fire station, remodeling of the old station and the purchase of equipment. Another Prospect Heights novelty was that a house on the adjacent property was removed after a public auction.

June 1973 saw the department get its first real ambulance and paramedics trained to man it. The Prospect Heights Lions Club contributed $3,000 toward the $14,000 cost of the ambulance, with the district paying the rest.

Today, the department has grown to 32 men with four engines, a squad car, an ambulance and a chief's car as equipment vehicles. The fire district is scheduled to seek bids soon for the fire station addition, which had been delayed by a lengthy technical process of relocating an alley easement. The current fire chief is Donald B. Gould, who replaced Chief Andrew in 1963.

Aerial 1955

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Sun, Sep 14, 2014

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