

(This electronic letter to the neighborhood was written shortly after the Dublin Street condo project was withdrawn and three weeks before we accidentally discovered the Short Street high-rise project at our doorstep.)

A Proposal to Save Leake Avenue

December 6, 2003

Dear friends and neighbors,

We are all relieved that the developer of the Dublin Street condos has withdrawn her plans. After weathering a dangerous storm it is customary to do two things. First, we have to give thanks for our rescue. Second, we have to plan for the future so that we can be prepared when the next developer comes knocking on Leake Avenue's door.

On December 2, 2003, the Uptown Triangle Neighborhood Association held its annual neighborhood meeting. Our District A Councilman, Jay Batt, was present and engaged our association's members in a discussion regarding the present and future shape of our neighborhood. When the question of zoning was inevitably raised, I made a presentation to our association and to Councilman Batt regarding my vision for the preservation of Leake Avenue. At the end of the discussion Councilman Jay Batt asked me to contact his office to discuss this further.

As a visual aid I brought along a presentation board with pictures of 24 homes within three blocks of my house — all of whom had a “No Variances for Dublin Street Condos” sign firmly planted in their front yards. The board had a picture of the proposed Dublin condos along with a 2001 letter from our neighborhood association criticizing an outrageous proposal for a *sixteen story* condominium on the square bounded by Short, Pearl, Huso and Leake Avenue. Anyone who thinks the Dublin condo project would not set a precedent for the rest of Leake Avenue should open their eyes and read this letter. I brought the 24 house pictures to show how emotional this issue has become, and how our neighbors feel about the possible “walling off of Leake Avenue.”

In order to save Leake Avenue, we have to change Leake Avenue.

Developers may look on Leake Avenue as a plum ripe for the plucking. Where else in the uptown area can you find an enormous patch of green space with as much excitement as the levee area? Where else besides the levee and Audubon Park can you see horses, dogs and people enjoying themselves and sharing such a space? If the Dublin condos project went ahead, then anyone else who can get two or three lots together on Leake Avenue will become another future threat to the integrity of our neighborhood.

First, we must look to change the name of Leake Avenue to something with more pizzazz and historical meaning. I propose renaming Leake Avenue to “River Road,” or

“Old River Road,” or “Historical River Road.” Saving River Road is much more appealing than saving Leake Avenue. Few houses have a Leake Avenue address, so changing Leake Avenue to River Road will not be disruptive to many residents.

Second, we must beautify Leake Avenue–River Road. Instead of Leake Avenue being only “a place to drive through,” we can make it “a destination to come to.” I propose to beautify a strip of land on the railroad side of Leake Avenue–River Road. We would only need a few feet. We don’t need a new walking path because such a walking path already exists at the top of the levee. With the addition of a few simple plantings on the railroad side of Leake Avenue–River Road we can mark this area as something special. Perhaps some local Louisiana plants and an occasional small tree would help. Perhaps a couple of mile markers proudly giving distances in large letters, and an occasional old-style lamppost might add more interest.

This “special place” would extend from the end of Magazine Street as it passes through Audubon Park and continue along the entirety of Leake Avenue. It would then hook up with the north end of Oak Street. This area has just seen the arrival of Graffiti Graphics and would benefit from a connection to the “Historical River Road.”

This special place would run along the Riverbend area, where many cars now park illegally. There is a parking shortage in the Riverbend area and on the weekend many cars line up next to the railroad tracks for want of a better parking place. I propose using the broad area next to the railroad tracks for overflow parking for the Riverbend area. Rather than allowing illegal parking “with a wink,” we should use this area to our advantage. If cars are going to park there, then let’s do it safely, in a beautified, accessible area.

We must play up our advantages. The railroad is a massive, powerful symbol for our area. Everyone living near Leake Avenue–River Road has felt the shaking of their homes as the train rumbled through the area. It’s always fun to point out to visitors that my house has been shaking for well over a hundred years and is still doing OK. Who hasn’t heard the train whistle at night and dreamt of the call of far-off places. When my children were small we all enjoyed running outside to wave at this huge brute of a railroad.

Therefore, we need a kiosk or other structure to display the history of our railroad and what it has meant for the development of Carrollton and New Orleans. Perhaps a location in the Riverbend area, near the intersection of Carrollton and St. Charles Avenue where the bus now stops would be appropriate. Any tourists climbing the levee from this area would then be able to stop and read about our historic area. Similarly, informational structures discussing the history of our levees, the history of the Corps of Engineers, the history of River Road, the history of Carrollton, the history of Oak Street or Magazine Street might also be encouraged along the new Leake Avenue–River Road corridor.

The levee complex has four distinct pieces.

Although many people consider the levee to be only the large green area on the far side of the railroad tracks, I believe our Leake Avenue-River Road levee is actually composed of *four* distinct features. First, the most prominent part of our levee complex consists of the large green space with the walking path on its top. Second, there is the open area with the railroad tracks. Third, there is Leake Avenue-River Road itself. And fourth, there are the houses built right next to Leake Avenue-River Road, on the town side of Leake Avenue-River Road.

I have often driven down Leake Avenue from the Jefferson Parish–Oak Street entrance and been amazed to see Lambeth House and the large condo buildings at the other end of Leake Avenue near Magazine Street look like they were leaning over onto the levee. I have also marveled at how the back of my own property, which abuts onto Leake Avenue, slopes downward towards the Short Street side of my property. I now realize that the reason for this illusion and house sloping is that the first row of houses is actually built on the levee. The levee doesn't simply end abruptly at the railroad tracks. Rather, it continues to slope downward into town.

These four items – the levee, the railroad tracks, the Leake Avenue roadway, and the first street row of houses – form a single, unified, harmonious, historic complex. It is this extraordinary streetscape complex that must be preserved *as a whole*. Any changes allowed to one of these four historic items will inevitably affect the entire levee complex. Therefore, we need a new historical overlay for these four items to protect the uniqueness of our area. I propose a new zoning overlay for our new Leake Avenue-River Road complex which will preserve the peaceful, small town feel of our area. Allowing high-rise condominiums or other such suburban structures must not be allowed under our new historic Leake Avenue-River Road levee complex zoning. Perhaps we should explore trading our lower height allowance request for a larger building bulk allowance, which is appropriate for fill-in housing in a historic area such as ours.

I am not against all development. I am only against development which sacrifices the core values of my neighborhood and lifestyle. Strolling along the path at the top of the levee is very pleasant. I enjoy looking down into the Historic City of Carrollton and the small-scale, one- and two-story buildings. I simply cannot imagine walking along the top of the levee and looking out into the living rooms of a string of high-rise condominium buildings along Leake Avenue-River Road. Uptown does not have to be another Lakeview.

We need a Federal grant to do this work.

The way to increase property values is not to allow developers to prostitute our neighborhoods and impose his or her suburban values on our charming, local neighborhoods. Rather, we need to beautify Leake Avenue-River Road, making it a park-like setting in an historic area with a powerful zoning overlay to protect it from profiteering.

And we need a Federal grant to pay for it all! (One neighbor at our association's meeting suggested we incorporate a memorial to the Buffalo Soldiers who camped somewhere near Audubon Park in our new "corridor" as a way to attract Federal funding.)

We will need to enlist other groups, which are interested in preservation. Perhaps the Preservation Resource Center, or Tulane's School of Architecture, along with others, could be enlisted in this project. Perhaps city-wide, state-wide or even national press exposure could be encouraged.

We need other neighborhood associations' help.

This project involves the entire stretch of Leake Avenue-River Road. Judging from my recent experience with the Dublin Street condo development, all groups near Carrollton Avenue and Leake Avenue-River Road are interested in preserving our neighborhood's character and charm. This project can galvanize a large part of the uptown-Carrollton community. If we are successful on this front, maybe we can cooperate on other issues of interest to all of us in the future. Recall that I found 24 neighbors within three blocks of my home who agreed to put signs in their front yards. I cannot imagine a better way to recruit new members for our local neighborhood associations. We need numbers. If we have large numbers of neighborhood residents supporting this project, then it will be difficult for our city officials to ignore our request.

Our neighborhoods share similar problems. A string of new high-rise condominium buildings walling off Leake Avenue will bring a significant increase in car traffic and parking problems. Although these high-rise buildings will face Leake Avenue, none of their traffic will empty out onto Leake Avenue. All of their traffic will dump out onto our small neighborhood streets, causing further congestion near our homes, schools and children.

A high-rise structure on Leake Avenue-River Road will put many of the homes of long-term neighborhood residents who live behind the structure in permanent shadow. A high-rise on Leake Avenue may increase the property value for the real estate developer and a few condominium owners, but it will kill the property value and privacy of many who live in its hulking shadow. I have been living here for 24 years. I love it here and want to preserve what I have for my children and their children. Let's see if we can work together and realize this dream.

The next step.

On December 16, 2003, the Uptown Triangle Neighborhood Association's Board of Directors will meet and form an Ad Hoc Committee to Save Leake Avenue. We will then seek input from other interested neighborhood groups regarding this issue. Jay Batt has already heard part of this presentation and asked me to follow up with him. We do not have to have a full working plan in order to meet again with Mr. Batt and formally present our request for his backing. All we need at this time is a show of coordinated strength and resolve to deal with this issue, now, before the next developer comes a'

knocking. Please discuss this proposal with your own neighborhood organizations. Join us in this worthy endeavor!

Sincerely yours,

Sheldon Hersh, MD