How Bethlehem's Hayes Street was rediscovered

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The lively, blue-collar neighborhood that Raymond Richter remembers as a child is showing subtle signs of a return along south Bethlehem’s Hayes Street.

Preening alongside the tired brick facades of his hillside neighborhood are the strategic restorations of some early 20th century homes.

Asphalt siding on one twin has been stripped down to the original wood. Chipped gray paint on another brick home has been covered in a warm, red color, and flowers flow from boxes affixed underneath black-trimmed windows.

A festive mural sprawls on the side of a row home. On the corner, benches and trees fill what had been an empty corner lot, drawing residents out of their homes for breathtaking views of the architecturally lit blast furnaces below.
The recent improvements there recall the days when steelworkers would while away the evening on their porches, watching the headlights flicker up South Mountain. Neighborhood nuns and children would go toe-to-toe on the basketball court, and two shoemakers would compete for the soles of the Hungarian, Polish and Italian families who lived there.

After Bethlehem Steel’s decline and the passing of some old-timers, Richter said, many of the homes became rentals. Backyard grapevines and vegetable gardens gave way to weeds, and aging homes went unrepairsed.

“I hope they could turn it around, I really do,” said Richter, 56, who recently had some facade work done on his row home. “South Side will always be in my heart.”

While redevelopment of the Bethlehem Steel plant has monopolized the city’s attention for decades, he said, it’s heart-warming to watch as his neighborhood also gets rediscovered.

The rediscovery, along a busy road that connects the posh homes in Saucon Valley to the entertainment venues at the former Bethlehem Steel, is not by chance.

Over the last three years, nonprofits, the city and corporate sponsors have invested more than $500,000 bringing the homes up to code, redoing facades and landscaping public areas, including this fall a street tree planting aimed at re-creating the leafy canopy that once framed the neighborhood.

The changes are eye-popping in a Census tract where 66 percent of the occupied homes are rentals and 11.2 percent are vacant, exceeding the citywide rates. While there are more properties that could use some sprucing up, the work done so far offers sort of a preview of what the neighborhood could become.

“Hayes Street is a gateway to the city, a shortcut for people to get over the mountain,” said Mayor Robert Donchez, who played in many of those homes as a boy. “It provides the first impression of the city to many, and it’s important that we make this investment.”

It’s hard to pinpoint exactly when the neighborhood began to turn around, though it’s been building over the last decade under the guidance of a South Side master plan that also conceptualized the streetscape at the neighborhood now known as Four Blocks International.

Since 2010, the city has directed $935,400 of federal HOME grants to create affordable housing on Hayes Street. Most of it — $735,000 — went toward a $10 million project to create artist lofts around the shuttered St. Stanislaus Church, a 1906 parish that has since been turned into an artists’ gallery and meeting space. The 46-apartment project, which opened in 2014, includes 28 apartments along Hayes Street.

“That kind of investment was eye-catching and led to a kind of rediscovery of Hayes Street,” said Ellen Larmer, associate executive director of community development at Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley. “A fairly affluent population uses Hayes to go to and from Saucon Valley, so those changes were noticed.”
Others were convinced Hayes was a neighborhood worth saving. Among them the Bethlehem Redevelopment Authority, which in 2010 stepped in to acquire a blighted property at 426 Hayes St.

Garbage filled the yard, and the house was vandalized and uninhabitable. Holes pocked the roof, and lead paint coated the interior walls.

In 2009, the 2½-story, 1,350-square-foot home was appraised at $25,000 in a neighborhood where the median value of an owner-occupied home is $94,300. -year census figures

The authority seized the blighted property and transferred it in 2015 to a subsidiary of Community Action, which oversaw a $200,000 makeover of the house where a family now lives.

“I don’t think I would have ever considered living here before. It was a rough area, but there’s been so many changes. It has so much potential.”

— Jody Petersen, who moved back to Hayes Street two years ago

And that’s not the only investment. The committee is overseeing more than $71,000 worth of facades of nine homes between the 400 and 500 blocks of Hayes Street. The city says even more money has been directed to facade improvements on Hayes since 2010.

That work convinced Jody Petersen, a 57-year-old who had moved out of state after a divorce, to return two years ago to the Hayes Street rental home she owned with her ex-husband.

The facade work that a Community Action subsidiary spearheaded outside her home convinced Petersen, who works at a home improvement store, to continue the work inside.

Petersen spent her off-hours peeling back the dated linoleum flooring and installing hardwood. She bought new kitchen cabinets and appliances. She ripped out an artificial outdoor carpet, planted a garden, installed a fountain and set out hummingbird feeders in the backyard.

“I don’t think I would have ever considered living here before. It was a rough area, but there’s been so many changes,” Petersen said. “It has so much potential.”

The latest project is something Community Action advocates affectionately nickname “the beast” at 414-418 Hayes St. It’s a three-unit structure featuring spacious homes with six bedrooms each.

The middle unit is rented out privately, but the end units have been vacant, pocked by peeling paint on the outside and buckling floor boards on the inside.
A Community Action subsidiary acquired 414 and 418 Hayes St. for a total renovation, and the owner of the rental cooperated with the facade improvements.

With financial help from the city, $155,000 was identified to renovate 414 and 418 Hayes for low- to moderate-income families and another $20,000 was obtained through Southside Vision for facade improvements, which include a 1,600-square-foot mural. The mural, painted by artist Holly Fields-Scott, shows a festival of people dancing, children painting a mural and a city streetscape. Overlooking all of this is the image of a woman staring out of a painted dormer.

That image is of Helen Ballek, who had grown up at 418 Hayes alongside a group of nuns in the middle unit. Ballek has since moved to another home in Bethlehem, but her daughter, who drives on Hayes daily, has been updating her on the neighborhood’s transformation. Ballek is tickled that a little piece of her will return to the neighborhood.

“It was such a great neighborhood,” she said. “So many memories.”

But, perhaps, a more dramatic example of the neighborhood’s turnaround is the attention from homebuyers who could afford to live just about anywhere in the Lehigh Valley.

Last September, Stephen P. DeWeerth accepted the position as dean of Lehigh’s P.C. Rossin College of Engineering and Applied Science. He and his wife, Valerie, were searching for a place where they could walk to campus and restaurants while having enough space for “300 pounds” of rescue dogs they own.

Their Realtor suggested an older home with “beautiful bones” in the 700 block of Hayes Street. The 1,462-square-foot, single-family home has incredible views of SteelStacks and enough room on the .13-acre property for an expansion. The DeWeerths are drawing up plans for renovations with an eye toward historic restoration.

The DeWeerths, who have lived in places from Dubai to just outside Atlanta, said they have never lived somewhere where they know so many names of their neighbors, some of whom have lived there for decades.

“We really love the vibrancy and growth of the South Side and understand the major transition that took place with the closure of Bethlehem Steel,” Stephen DeWeerth said. “We appreciate the ties to that past through our neighbors and are very excited to be part of its present and future.”

**What is the Lehigh Valley Community Land Trust?**

A subsidiary of the Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley, the trust rehabilitated the blighted home at 426 Hayes St. and turned it over to a family as part of its goal to preserve and develop quality, affordable housing.

Families buy the house and lease the land underneath from the trust for $35 a month. The 99-year lease allows the owner to transfer the house to other income-qualified people as long as its used for single-family occupancy. Rentals are not allowed.
Source: Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley

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