

## **Hamlin Park hoping to regain its wholeness**

Don Hill remembers when his parents bought a home in the Hamlin Park neighborhood in the 1950s – only the third black family on his block of the old Humboldt Parkway.

Hill, now 68, had a newspaper delivery route for two years, and recalls his neighbors and “wonderful” experiences living along one of the Frederick Law Olmsted-designed parkways. When they first moved in, the neighborhood was still somewhat exclusive, with attractive homes lining the wide, grassy median of the beautiful, tree-lined boulevard.

“If you saw anyone walking along Humboldt Parkway to Main Street, after a snowfall, it was like walking through paradise. It was unbelievable,” Hill said Sunday during a community gathering. “When the trucks came through to cut down the trees in 1962, 1963, it was devastating. My neighborhood changed.”

Now, the professional photographer and others in the neighborhood want to correct what one termed a “travesty” by restoring the trees and grand parkway – over the top of the Kensington Expressway. That would reunite two communities above and restore Olmsted’s vision after 60 years, while still allowing the speedy flow of traffic underneath.

And on Sunday, their group – Restore Our Community Coalition – launched its “I Remember” grass-roots campaign of lawn signs, social media and public pressure, designed to build a groundswell of support for what would be a \$560 million construction project.

“It’s a grand idea, a grand vision for Buffalo,” Karen Stanley Fleming, executive director of the coalition, said during a fireside chat-style program in the neighborhood’s historic 1854 stone farmhouse on Hedley Place. “We want to see a beautiful, fitting gateway to our waterfront.”

Ultimately, supporters want to see the parkway restored from downtown to the Scajaquada Expressway, but the initial focus will be on the portion from Ferry to Best streets. And, they stressed that they want to reconnect and strengthen the community – not remove the highway.

“We don’t want to disrupt that traffic. We want suburbanites to come in and leave,” said Richard Cummings, president of the Black Chamber of Commerce, a trustee of the Olmsted Parks Conservancy and a member of the coalition’s steering committee. “But we don’t want it to disrupt our life as much as it has.”

Championed by resident Clarke Eaton since the expressway was built, and now led by a professional executive director and steering committee, Restore Our Community Coalition is focused on restoring the parklike atmosphere of Humboldt Parkway and the Hamlin Park neighborhood.

Organization members lament the Kensington’s impact on the neighborhood – when the state tore down houses, ripped up the boulevard and dug a canyon to construct the expressway through the neighborhood, despite community opposition at four public hearings. Residents were evicted or moved to North Buffalo and the suburbs. Businesses struggled, failed or left. Blight developed and crime grew. And today, instead of owner-occupied homes, many houses in the neighborhood are owned by absentee landlords and rented to college students.

“This is a group of people that has lived with a mistake for 50 years,” said Stephanie Barber Geter, chairwoman of the coalition and president of the Hamlin Park Taxpayers Association. “We can change this, right here.”

Humboldt was one of the only Olmsted-designed parkways in the country to be deliberately destroyed, in stark contrast to Chapin, Lincoln and Bidwell parkways in the city, the group noted.

But all that can change, its leaders say. “If we can restore Humboldt Parkway,

we can stop the blight, even stop the crime,” Fleming said.

A \$100,000 study by University at Buffalo’s School of Architecture and Planning and the Regional Institute found that the project, despite its high upfront investment, would generate about \$1 billion in economic impact. That includes creation of 1,000 construction jobs, with spinoff effects. UB students even created a mock-up of what the neighborhood could look like, now on display in the nearby Buffalo Museum of Science.

Restoration of the neighborhood would also raise property values and create wealth, draw more residents because of the appeal of living on a boulevard or parkway, and lure businesses back to a community that they largely abandoned decades ago, Fleming said.

Environmental remediation – by planting oxygen-producing trees and burying the polluting traffic in a tunnel – would improve air quality, addressing concerns about asthma. And the project would enhance overall quality of life, she added.

Proponents said the project, first unveiled earlier this year, has already gained some support in the community and among political leaders, including Rep. Brian Higgins, D-Buffalo, and Sen. Charles E. Schumer, D-N.Y. But Fleming noted that “it takes more than a conversation” to loosen the federal or state purse-strings.

“This provides the politicians with the wind beneath their wings,” Fleming said. “We know it’s not an easy task, asking Congress for \$560 million. We want to help them.”

The campaign is designed to evoke memories of what the neighborhood was like before the highway, and to energize not only current residents but anyone in the region who used to live there. The group, which presented a slideshow of old photos from the parkway’s glory days, hopes to record video recollections and testimony to bolster its case. And the campaign will culminate in a “Restore the

Community” march in late spring along Humboldt, from Ferry Street to Martin Luther King Jr. Park.

“Everyone in this committee is working hard, trying to rectify this wrong,” Fleming said. “We are trying to engage as many professionals as possible.”

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