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Tearing down existing homes to build new ones can sometimes revitalize an established neighborhood

By CINDY HOEDEL
The Kansas City Star

The first part of Mark and Constance Eddy's homeownership story is classic: In 1998 the newlyweds bought a "starter" home in a post-World War II subdivision in Prairie Village.

The 900-square-foot, two-bedroom, one-bath house was dated, with 1950s metal cabinets and gold-flecked Formica counters in the kitchen, but cozy.

"It was all we needed," Mark Eddy said.

What really sold the couple on the home was the street. Prairie Lane is a winding street of tiny houses nestled close together under a canopy of large trees. The neighborhood is next to the Prairie Village Shops, which contains an urban mix of businesses — gas station, hardware store, drugstore and diner, as well as upscale restaurants and boutiques.

"People live in their front yards. There's a mix of ages — some neighbors are like grandparents to the children on the street. It really has a sense of community," Eddy said.

Seven years later the couple had two small children and a third on the way. It was time to trade up. So the Eddys sold the house on Prairie Lane and bought a 1,900-square-foot ranch on a big lot in Leawood, near 103rd Street and Sagamore. They were living the American dream, Johnson County style.

But in a 21st-century twist to the tale, the Eddys were unhappy in the "better" neighborhood. The street was usually deserted and quiet, except for the distant hum of traffic on Interstate 435.

"We immediately missed the neighbors, and we missed walking to the shops," Mark Eddy said. Two years later, when the house next door to their first home came up for sale, the Eddys decided to buy it, tear it down and build a new house on Prairie Lane big enough for their family to grow into.

The Eddys are what Prairie Village real estate broker Scott Lane calls a "boomerang family."

"Northern Prairie Village used to be a feeder neighborhood. Young families would start out in the north Village, then 'move up' to Leawood. Today we're seeing families that want to move to a new subdivision out south, but then they come back.

"This has the potential of changing the migratory pattern of northeast Johnson County," Lane said.

At 3,400 square feet, the Eddys' new home towers over its neighbors on Prairie Lane. The home is in compliance with city codes requirements for setback from the street, setbacks from the sides of the property, height and footprint on the lot. But shortly after groundbreaking, the Prairie Village Homes Association took the Eddys to court, claiming the proposed house design was in violation of deed restrictions that limited to homes to "1 1/2" stories. The judge eventually ruled in favor of the Eddys.

Mark Eddy, co-owner of Gahagan-Eddy Building Co., says he talked with many neighbors on the street and showed them his house plans to try to gain their approval before moving ahead with the teardown. A majority of homeowners on his street signed a petition in favor of allowing the house.

Bill Chinnery on the homes association board of directors, says he thinks the chocolate-brown exterior paint and two tall trees on the lot help the house blend into the neighborhood in summer. But in winter he thinks the house sticks out too much.

"I like the house, but it's too big for the neighborhood," Chinnery said.

Jessamine Guislain, who has lived on the street since 1965, disagrees.

"It's a beautiful house, and I enjoy looking at it," Guislain said. "I'm happy to see a family who loved Prairie Lane able to move back to it."

Guislain said allowing teardowns and new construction on the street helps keep the community intact. "In my own experience with a house next door to me, every family who lived there, once they had their second child, moved."

Eddy says most of his neighbors have been supportive, but he acknowledges others think the house is too big. "I respectfully disagree. If a house is beautiful, I don't care if it's twice the size of the one next to it. It should only be a problem if it's ugly."

To prevent ugly new houses from being constructed, Eddy has joined forces with the homeowners association in talking to the city about setting up an architectural review board, as some other cities in the county have.

In Mission Hills, where teardowns are a booming trend, a five-member architectural review board appointed by the mayor and approved by the city council reviews any proposed changes to the exterior of a home, down to new windows.

Prairie Village recently adopted an ordinance to notify homes associations of permit requests within their neighborhoods, says assistant city administrator Dennis Enslinger.

"Everybody has their own expectation of what the neighborhood is and what it should become, and the city is trying to balance those interests for everybody involved. But it is an ever-changing balance," Enslinger said.

Lane said many of the homes in northern Prairie Village were built hastily on concrete block foundations. "They were built to last 50 years, not 100 years," he said. "Putting an addition on the back or adding a second story perpetuates the obsolescence of the home design."

Cydney Millstein, owner of Architectural & Historical Research LLC in Kansas City, says preserving historic neighborhoods is important, but it doesn't mean everything has to stay the same.

"If new designs are done tastefully with a tip of the hat to what was going on historically, that's OK. If it's bringing life back to a neighborhood that became kind of stale after a while, this is a good way to inject vitality back into the neighborhood."

HOW BIG A TREND?

Local builders say teardowns to make way for large new homes are most prevalent in northeast Johnson County and along the Ward Parkway corridor in Kansas City.

For example, in Mission Hills teardowns are increasing dramatically, city administrator Courtney Christensen says; 13 homes were torn down in 2007, more than double the number in any previous year, and permit applications are on track to match or surpass that number this year.

In Prairie Village, eight properties have been torn down in the previous 12 months, assistant city administrator Dennis Enslinger says.

In Kansas City, teardowns are difficult to evaluate because demolition permits include vacant properties and urban renewal projects on the city's east side, says Bradley Wolf, Landmarks Commission administrator.

Brian Hickey, co-owner of Teardowns.com, a real estate site for buyers and sellers based in Clarendon Hills, Ill., says the main factors that make an older neighborhood attractive for new construction are:

- Proximity to a metro center
- Good schools
- Mature trees
- Parks

GETTING PERMISSION

Architectural historian Cydney Millstein of Kansas City offers these tips for avoiding litigation and hard feelings if you're contemplating building a new home in an older neighborhood:

•**Go to City Hall** in the city where you want to build. Talk to people in the planning department to find out if your neighborhood of choice is linked to a neighborhood or homeowners association. "They will help you maneuver through the paperwork."

•**Work with an architect** who understands the neighborhood. "If you're working with somebody who can guide you in your design so that it's sensitive to the area, you've already got a jumpstart on the process."

•**Communicate with all the neighbors.** "Make sure everyone knows what's going on. That way you create a

general good feeling about the process and how you went about building your house.”

DO THE MATH

To decide whether a teardown project makes financial sense, evaluate whether the total cost of the new project will be in line with other properties in the neighborhood. Total costs include:

Lot: Buying a house in an existing neighborhood generally costs more than buying an empty lot in a new subdivision. You are paying a premium for the old trees and the location.

Demolition: Tearing down a house can cost as little as \$7,000 or as much as \$20,000 or more, depending on the size of the home. Trucking away the debris and dump fees are the most expensive part.

New construction: Extra costs are incurred if existing trees on the lot are preserved, if access to the building site is difficult or if significant alterations to the original plan have to be made to meet city or home association requirements.

ON THE WEB

To join a discussion forum about teardown/new construction projects in older neighborhoods, go to KansasCity.com/FYI.

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