West Side: Still room for families?

By CHRIS LEPPEK
IJN Assistant Editor

A yard sign on the West Side states quite clearly what many long-term residents of the neighborhood do not desire as new development continues unabated.

You have a community very concerned about its future in its traditional and much-loved home.

DENSITY IS NOT JUST A SQUARE-FOOT AND TRAFFIC MATTER

A spiritual leader of Zera Abraham, Rabbi Tzvi Steinberg has been compelled to become a spokesman for the area’s Jewish community on the subject of urban growth.

As a leader who views his rabbinical role holistically — not limited strictly to religious matters — he has also done much of the math when it comes to the economic challenges his congregants are facing.

“The continued trend of single family homes being demolished on a regular basis and being replaced with townhomes and one or two bedroom studio apartments threatens the makeup of the community as we know it and how it has been for over 130 years,” he told the Intermountain Jewish News earlier this month.

“Our community makeup is indeed family centered and we have a high population of young people with nice size families who need a place to live."

While not an existential threat to the West Side haredim, he adds, growth remains a serious challenge.

“Many of these Jews and their descendants gradually moved to other sections of the city, other ethnic groups, particularly Hispanics, took their place. But a determined core of Jews has remained on the West Side to this day and remains a vital population in the area.

This community is solidly Orthodox, even haredi, or “ultra-Orthodox,” in vernacular parlance, distinct from their neighbors in their religious tradition, attire and lifestyle.

The steep prices for such homes — often approaching a million dollars — aren’t helping at all, he adds.

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“Although we have a strong network to help identify housing and we can generally meet the need, there are certainly are observant Jews from elsewhere who would like to move to Denver, the rabbi says — and

This community is not in danger, the current structure of our community is in danger.

It’s different than a community which would allow for driving on their day of worship, Saturday or Sunday, depending on the respective religion,” Rabbi Steinberg says, “because the congregants don’t need to live in the same place.”

Like virtually any congregation, Zera Abraham would love to grow its membership and community but prospective newcomers — and there certainly are observant Jews from elsewhere who would like to move to Denver, the rabbi says — are
discouraged when they see the small inventory of available single family homes on the West Side.

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Neighborhood completely transformed
Studio apartments gobble up homes. Now what?

Rabbi Steinberg is seeing some encouraging signs. This month, the Volunteers of America opened its waiting list for a new apartment building in the area that will include a number of three-bedroom and lower-income units, just the sort of domiciles many Zera Abraham families need.

And last September, the Denver City Council rejected a rezoning request that would have allowed construction of another apartment complex abutting Sloan's Lake. The complex probably would have included at least 100 units, all of them small with one or two bedrooms.

“The applicants were offered a fair compromise, which was to build the building with three-bedroom apartments,” Rabbi Steinberg says. “This way we could allow for families to live there. Would it be as profitable as studio and one-bedroom apartments? Probably not, but I know there’s a building on Sheridan near 44th Ave. which has multi-bedroom units. It’s hard to know what will actually be taken into account when final decisions happen, but there’s discussion, there’s\n
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The demographic is changing, becoming singles and young couples which has been passed on in our community for over a century — has become harder and harder to preserve. We are preserving it, but it’s taking a lot more effort.” Zera Abraham’s traditional large family-oriented membership may gradually evolve into one focused on smaller families, childless couples and retirees.

“I don’t think that will make the community die,” the rabbi says, “but it will have to change.”

The plan to which the rabbi refers is officially called the Neighborhood Planning Initiative, a city-wide effort to chart Denver’s future as it copes with the unprecedented growth it currently faces. Actively seeking residents’ input, the initiative is divided into regional sections.

The portion covering the Jewish West Side is called the West Planning Area and includes the neighborhoods of Barnum, Barnum West, Sun Valley, Valverde, Villa Park and West Colfax.

Rabbi Steinberg is on the steering committee for the West Planning Area and Zera Abraham hosted the first of its planning meetings.

While he feels that the planning process should do a better job of formally documenting neighbors’ concerns and ideas, the rabbi says he is encouraged so far by what appears to be the city’s receptivity to what Jews and other West Side residents have to say. In particular, he praises the work of District 1 City Councilwoman Amanda Sandoval, elected to her first term last June.

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High-rise, multi-story apartments and condos have become increasingly common sights in the West Side of the 21st century.

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Increasing population influx means increased density, resulting in any number of changes to a traditional neighborhood’s character and quality of life.
time. The spaces are taken up by people who don’t live on the block. That problem, among others, Abrams feels, are direct results of the kind of housing being built on the West Side. “There should be a value placed on single family housing, and not just to allow developers to squeeze the maximum amount of units in their buildings to maximize their profits.”

The compact and high-density development inevitably means more people moving into the neighbor- hood, increasingly singles and young couples, he says. Not all of that is negative. The influx of new residents actually makes the neighborhood feel safer in terms of crime. “There are more people out walking around,” Abrams says, “which helps people feel more comfortable.”

But more people also means more demand for parking and more traffic, which can be a safety hazard for pedestrians and drivers alike. Because of the competition for parking spaces, people park all the way to the end of intersections, ignoring signs that tell them otherwise, which makes it difficult for drivers to move along.

“I’ve been begging different people in the city to put in four-way stop signs at intersections which are very hard to cross, like Wolf and 16th,” Abrams says. “If you want to go walk by Sloan’s Lake in the afternoon sometimes you can wait five min- utes before you can cross 17th.” He is also concerned with how new development is affecting the neighborhood’s family character. “The whole concept now that you don’t have front yards or back yards, since all of the space is used for the house, has a negative impact. People just hang out in their house and you don’t have that neighbor- hood feel. “On my block we have quite a few Jewish families and in the sum- mer all the kids hang out together outside and play. But when you put up all these units with no yards outside and play. But when you compound, it makes it very difficult. “The price of renting is probably somewhere between two and three thousand dollars a month, and to be able to afford a mortgage on a house that costs $750,000, and putting down 20% for a down payment, is a big challenge.”

Orthodox Jews from the East Coast, Israel and elsewhere are being discouraged from considering Den- ver in general, or the West Side specifically, Abrams says, “since the wages in Denver are not equal to the cost of living any- more.” Those who decide to come out West anyway will “turn to different parts of Denver or choose to move some- where else in the Midwest,” Abrams says. “There are Jewish communi- ties in the Midwest besides Den- ver that people are looking at.”

While Abrams says he’s not yet seeing any actual attrition from the West Side—that is people choos- ing to sell their homes and then mov- ing somewhere else—“what you do see more of is young couples who are ready to buy houses and they try their best, but the houses on the West Side are older and small- er and for what they cost they can’t buy,” he adds. “What you are seeing is that people are buying smaller houses.”

Despite such obstacles, Abrams insists that the Jewish West Side is not in a state of despair over growth issues. The religious institu- tions that reside there are healthy and growing. Indeed, somewhat iron- ically, both the Kollel and Toras Chaim have been purchas- ing land and developing it for their own expansion projects, suggest- ing that they are contributing to the growth themselves. Overall, Abrams says he trusts the neighborhood’s Jewish leaders to come up with solutions to help their members find places to live and to preserve the unique cultur- al character of their neighborhood. But he echoes his rabbi and coun- selor, it’s not feasible.”

This early 20th century photo shows what much of the West Side looked like a century ago — humble, single-family dwellings and small businesses. Those days are gone.

One single family home that was bought for about $300,000 a few years ago is probably worth about a million dollars now. When people look at the price of housing it makes very difficult to cross 17th. The new development is affecting the neighborhood’s family character. The whole concept now that you don’t have front yards or back yards, since all of the space is used for the house, has a negative impact. People just hang out in their house and you don’t have that neighbor- hood feel.

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