

SIX AND THE CITY

Seven months after moving into my Putnam Heights home, part of the Mortson Street/Putnam Heights "perfect six" redevelopment, I still feel that I made the right decision. Living in Hartford makes it easy to get to my office and to restaurants, theaters and all else the city has to offer.

The house is great. My newly renovated perfect six includes a 900-square-foot first floor with living room, dining room, kitchen, family room and a lavatory. The second floor, same size as the first, has a master bedroom/bathroom suite, two more bedrooms and another full bath. My third floor is unfinished, but I will turn it into a bedroom-office suite. With 8 1/2-foot ceilings, the interior living area is spacious. My yard is 25 feet wide by 100 feet deep. I park in a shared driveway. I have small side yard, an elegant front porch and a small back porch with just enough room for a grill. I was the first new owner to move into Putnam Heights. This was not much different than being the first person to move into a newly constructed subdivision in the suburbs. I had moved into a construction zone. Today, with 15 of the 22 units occupied, and the remaining units to be occupied soon, the level of construction is greatly reduced. Grass has been planted, landscaping and fencing installed, sidewalks and driveways completed. Many of my neighbors have arrived.

Putnam Heights is diverse. There are seven perfect sixes that were not part of the redevelopment (along with 22 new and rehabilitated owner-occupied units that were). Of these seven apartment buildings, two remain abandoned and boarded up, three are poorly maintained and two are well kept up by a landlord who sees the economic potential in the neighborhood and is committed to make his properties work.

The rental properties house many low- and moderate-income families and individuals. The new owners of the other properties fill in the rest of the demographic spectrum. We are black, white and Hispanic, single and married, with and without children. We are government and insurance employees, school teachers, people who work for nonprofit corporations. We even have a state trooper. Most of us work in Hartford.

Last November, when I wrote about my move to Putnam Heights, I was most concerned about drug dealing on my street. Though I am sure that some drug dealing still takes place, there isn't nearly as much as there used to be, though it is still prevalent in the surrounding areas.

It would be naive of me to say that crime is not an issue in my neighborhood. It is. But it is not the violent crime that we typically associate with Hartford based on sensationalized news media reports. It is quality-of-life crimes, such as burglary and theft, that concern me most. Since I have lived here, no homes have been broken into, but three cars were stolen and one broken into. Two of the stolen cars were returned after being taken for joy rides. The only other crimes were the egging of a car and some flower pots being stolen.

But residents can deal with these crimes. Most, if not all of us, have installed home security systems. Many of us keep our outside lights on all night or have installed motion detectors. We know about locking our cars, not leaving valuables in the car and about being a good neighbor who is aware of the surroundings. We also have a well-organized block watch program that includes the residents of Mortson Street and Putnam Heights. Most important, the Hartford police have been very responsive to calls.

Living in an urban environment is rewarding, but takes some adjustment. Cities are noisy until you get used to it. Home and car stereos are heard throughout the neighborhood. The infamous ice cream truck plants its song in my head. The Lifestar helicopters overhead many times a day and the fire trucks from the firehouse on Park Street all add to the sounds of the city. But by nightfall, the neighborhood is mostly quiet and you can hear crickets on a warm summer night.

Frog Hollow is one of the city's more distressed neighborhoods, with large concentrations of low-income households, an aging housing stock and aging infrastructure. But the neighborhood also has many bright spots.

Along with the newly renovated apartments on Mortson, Putnam Heights and Park Terrace, there's Columbia Street with its historic row houses, beautiful Pope Park and the Park Street commercial district, where an ambitious streetscape project is underway. There's momentum in this neighborhood, as there is downtown and in so many other Hartford neighborhoods.

If we have to take common-sense precautions, the benefits of living in the city are worth it. Walking to Capitol Avenue for Sunday breakfast. Riding my bike to Bushnell Park, Elizabeth Park and the Riverfront on weekends is a joy. With the Bushnell, the Civic Center, the Wadsworth and the Mark Twain House just minutes away, there is always something to do. The same goes for access to restaurants and nightlife. This summer, I enjoyed a lecture at the Mark Twain House, ``The Producers" at the Bushnell, jazz in the park and vintage baseball. I have tickets to Theater Works. I'll be there when the Wolf Pack return for another season of hockey in Hartford.

So, I am cautiously optimistic about my investment. Hartford is improving, but much more still needs to be done. Although I and 55 other homeowners who have invested in Mortson/Putnam Heights and the neighborhood are committed to it success, the area's fate lies in factors beyond our control. National and regional economic factors, downtown development, neighborhood investment throughout the city, improving the school system and reducing crime will all influence the success of our investment.

But the No. 1 thing that needs to happen is a commitment by absentee landlords in the area. Many of their apartment buildings are poorly maintained. Deteriorating porches, unkempt lawns and trash on these properties detract from the appearance of this historic neighborhood. With rents ranging from \$700 to \$900 a month, not including utilities, it is hard to believe that these investor owners cannot afford to take better care of their properties. The city and developers have done their part in making this development happen. We residents have done our part by investing in this neighborhood.

Now we need the owners of investment/rental properties to do their part. This is not the devastated neighborhood of years ago that was plagued by crime, gangs and arson. Things are improving, people are investing, new residents and owners are working together for positive change. It is time for the absentee landlords to return to their properties and take responsibility for them. With property values rising in the city, the market will reward a little care and investment.

People make choices about where they live. For those of us who don't want to commute 20 miles a day, who want to be near our jobs and cultural attractions, Hartford is a good choice. If we have to deal with some quality of life issues, it's a small price to pay.

Donald J. Poland is the executive director for The Neighborhoods of Hartford Inc. and vice president of the Connecticut Chapter of the American Planning Association.