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## Brookhaven's Master Stroke

Historic designation gives neighborhood leverage with developers

When Bettie Brannon went door to door asking her Brookhaven neighbors for information on their houses that might help her get the neighborhood included on the National Register of Historic Places, some of them thought the notion a bit batty.

“Even some people who’ve lived here 50 years said, “What’s historic?” Mrs. Brannon recalled. “But they’re so close to it, they don’t see it.”

Dekalb County Commissioner Chairman Manuel Maloof didn’t see it either. “If something 50 to 60 years old is historic” he said “then I’m historic.”

But in April, the Georgia Historic Preservation Section determined that part of Brookhaven is historically significant and nominated the 300 acres enveloping the Capital City Country Club for inclusion in the National Registry.

In doing so, Mrs. Brannon and her husband, John, not only earned recognition for the neighborhood’s enduring charms, but also secured some protection from the Buckhead development boom that other established residential neighborhoods might envy.

With the historic designation, said John Brannon, “You might not win every battle, but you might exact some compromises.”

Like many of their 700 neighbors in the North Atlanta / Club Area Civic Association – which represents a well-to-do area roughly bordered by Peachtree Road, Peachtree-Dunwoody Road, Windsor Parkway, and Mabry Road – the Brannons want their community to stay much as it is.

In many ways, the Brookhaven of today remains faithful to the ideal of a 1914 real estate advertisement that pitched the area as an escape from Atlanta, then a developing city to the south.

“With a suburban home of this kind, which can be reached in 30 minutes, with no smoke and no dust, with beautiful forest trees, and a golf course at your door, there is really no necessity for taking an expensive trip off in the summer.” said the ad.

Several years later, the trees and golf course still dominate Brookhaven, but Atlanta is no longer a city to the south. MARTA rapid rail trains glide in and out of Brookhaven’s new station, bringing the city to the neighborhood’s doorstep. Just a mile to the south, opulent office towers are sprouting around Lenox Square. Peachtree Road is undergoing a dizzying high-density commercial and residential rebirth. And politicians are pondering an extension of nearby Georgia 400.

But unlike other residential Atlanta neighborhoods, some of which have sold out lot, stock, and barrel, the sections of Brookhaven north of Peachtree Road so far have successfully held its own against the growth around it.

The historic designation alone does not completely protect the area from the rezoning, commercial encroachment, and tantalizing developer propositions being encountered by many north Atlanta neighborhoods, said Richard Cloues, state National Register coordinator.

“The main benefit of the listing would be recognition of the historic quality of the neighborhood so that quality can be taken into account during planning and development decisions,” Cloues said.

As outlined in the nomination summary, the proposed Brookhaven Historic District is noteworthy as the first “country-club community” in Atlanta. Its curvilinear street plan and extensive “naturalistic” landscaping have merit as examples of suburban residential development popular in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, according to the summary. The Colonial, Georgian, and Tudor revival architecture of the homes was also cited as worthy.

Although a National Register at one time might have enabled residents to get federal money for restoration efforts, those funds dried up in 1981, Cloues said. The country club, however, is eligible for a 25 percent tax credit on approved renovation, he said.

What the designation will do, said Jack Huber, civic association president, is enhance neighborhood pride and commitment to preserving its integrity.

The Brookhaven nomination will be considered by the U.S. Department of the Interior later this year and approval is expected. Usually no more than 60 entities are added to the Register from Georgia annually, and there are only 25 historic districts in the metro area.

The handsome houses of Brookhaven sit on generous lots and sell for equally generous prices – from \$150,000 to \$800,000 with most going for around \$300,000, according to residents.

But they usually aren’t available long, said Linda Finsthwait, an agent for Harry Norman Realtors. A large part of Brookhaven’s appeal, she said, is that it’s a “roots neighborhood”.

Sitting inside Chestnut Hall, their stately 1937 home shaded by 100-foot pines, the Brannons recalled with amusement feeling almost intimidated when they put down their roots there.

“We wondered if we were too young for the neighborhood,” said Mrs. Brannon, now 61. “It was sedate, very establishment, prestigious. Now, we’re surrounded by Yuppies.”

The Capital City Country Club, first known as the Brookhaven Country Club, has been the anchor for the neighborhood since 1912. Many Brookhaven residents are members of the club, which has an initiation fee of \$20,000 and annual dues of \$2,000. But even those who can’t afford to golf on its greens enjoy them – a fact illustrated by the army of joggers and cyclists that circles the course each evening and on weekends.

“Most of the people that move here want to walk dogs and push baby carriages,” said resident Jane Dickson. “It’s a neighborhood where everyone tries to get to know the people around them.”

Huber, an Atlanta attorney who for 17 years has lived in a rambling fieldstone house facing the golf course, emphasized that members of the North Atlanta / Club Area Civic Association are not – and will not become – “obstructionists” to Buckhead development.

Huber said he and his neighbors know that change is inevitable. But they insist on having input into any decision that could negatively impact the area, he said.

“We think there’s a very real place for a high-quality residential neighborhood like ours in close proximity to the commercial development going on in Buckhead,” said Huber. “People have to live *somewhere* if they’re going to work in Atlanta’s commercial districts. This is a prime area that can be, should be, and will be maintained for single-family residential purposes. We’re dedicated to that proposition.”