

Woodruffians step up to safeguard assets

Neighborhood succeeds with tax strategy where Mass Ave and Fountain Square couldn't

WOODRUFF PLACE FOLKS – they call themselves Woodruffians – are a resourceful lot. They host home tours. An annual flea market. Progressive dinners. Casino nights.

They create lots of camaraderie. Raise lots of money. But they need to, because Woodruff Place has infrastructure unlike any other historic neighborhood, unlike any other neighborhood. It owns a Town Hall. It boasts esplanades, fountains, historic street lights, statues, urns, unique walls along Michigan Street 10th Street – all of which were once maintained by the City of Indianapolis, but all of which have been systematically abandoned by that City and are now the responsibility of the neighborhood.

And so Woodruff Place has lots of fund-raisers, raising lots of money. But not nearly enough.

"We've raised quite a bit of money, but we know how expensive this stuff is," said Tom Abeel, who spent four recent years as president of the Woodruff Place Civic League. Average annual maintenance on the fountains costs \$11,000. A recent restoration of a Cross Drive fountain cost over \$100,000.

"We don't raise that kind of money."

Enter Woodruff Place resident Will Pritchard, who in 2012 approached the Civic League and the Woodruff Place Foundation with a funding concept: Establish Woodruff Place as an Economic Improvement District – an "EID." In a nutshell, EIDs self-impose a surtax upon property taxes, so that the money can be used for local improvements and services that enhance – not replace – existing municipal services.

Think of it as a voluntary condominium fee.

Pritchard had some experience with the idea. Several years ago, when he was on the staff of the Local Initiatives Support Corp., he had been involved in a plan to establish Mass Ave as an Economic Improvement District. That effort failed in 2006, and six years later failed again, as did an effort to establish Fountain Square as such a district.

But Woodruff Place has succeeded. Following a methodical effort by a Woodruff Place committee led by Pritchard, an overwhelming majority of Woodruff Place property owners have signed on to the petition. In October, the City-County Council made it official with a 26-1 vote. Starting with next year's property tax bills, Woodruff Place property owners will pay the assessments which will generate \$45,000 a year to help maintain Woodruff Place infrastructure – those fountains, the streetlights, the esplanade, the walls, the Town Hall.

Why would Woodruff Place succeed where Mass Ave and Fountain Square – seemingly districts where such a plan would make more sense – failed?

Two main reasons seem to emerge: First, what Pritchard called "the goodwill of many years of volunteerism." When approached with the idea of paying a bit extra to boost the neighborhood, he said, "A lot of people barely blinked an eye."

Second reason: A slow, methodical effort which lasted nearly two years, with a 18-person committee and legal work by neighbor Josh Robertson.

"We learned about EIDs, what not to do," said Pritchard, who knew first-hand the perils from his past work on Mass Ave's effort. "We talked to three city-county councilors, a consultant in Denver, and we learned about Fort Wayne's Downtown EID, which generates \$300,000 a year."

There were monthly meetings in neighbors' homes, in the Town Hall. The committee explored whether such a plan would work, and then developed a 10-page business plan.



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By Bill Brooks

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They met with anybody and everybody who would listen.

Arguments on behalf of the EID included that it is "fair and democratic, that it is self-governed, that funds must be spent in the neighborhood, that it leverages additional funding from outside the neighborhood, that property owners can petition at any time to terminate it – and that in any case it has a 15-year term limit.

"People would ask questions we didn't know the answers to," said Abeel. So they found out and added footnotes to the plan. After several months of outreach, determining which rates and which methodology would make the most sense, they started the petition drive. The results were eye-opening.

The official rules are these: 50.1 percent of property owners must sign. And those signatures must represent 50.1 percent of the total assessed valuation of the district. But the reality is something different. City-county councilors told the Woodruffians that they better get 75 percent of the property owners, considering the council's distaste for being associated with even a voluntary tax.

There are 263 "voting parcels" in Woodruff Place, which means the committee would need to get the support of over 200 property owners. What resulted,

Pritchard said, "is one of the most comprehensive door-to-door campaigns ever in the city," with over 230 property owners contacted. Committee members even traveled outside the district for face-to-face meetings with absentee owners (although, Pritchard and Abeel admitted, no one went to Australia to talk to one such owner).

When the smoke had cleared and the petitions had been signed, the important number stood at 78%. Owners of 204 parcels had said yes. Only 7% said no. Another 16% did not vote either way. "We were thrilled," Pritchard said, computing that – of those property owners who had responded – 85% of respondents said yes. "We couldn't believe it."

Pritchard and Abeel said one key to the effort was the support throughout the process by City-County Councilors Zach Adamson and Jeff Miller, who were the legislation's sponsors. A third councilor, Mary Moriarty, signed on when the matter was approved by the Metropolitan Economic Development Committee.

Other strong – and surprising – support came from the owners of Woodruff Place's 31 apartment buildings. Fearing reluctance from that quarter, the committee had a special meeting with the apartment owners. In turns out they were on board from the start. "They get it," Abeel said. "They know the attraction of the neighborhood is very dependent on the park-like atmosphere of the neighborhood."

One worry which emerged is that the guaranteed income stream might hurt local fund-raising, or even the neighborhood's near-legendary level of volunteerism.

Neither Abeel nor Pritchard seem overly concerned about such a development. In fact, Pritchard said, the EID effort seems to have brought a few more neighbors into the fold, now that they've learned more about the challenges the neighborhood and its two key organizations face.

One other key benefit: The revenue from the EID – and the fact that the property owners were willing to tax themselves – will help get more grants, especially those which require matching funds.

The fight to preserve Woodruff Place's many amenities isn't over by any means. But reinforcement have arrived, and no longer do a handful of people have to do all the work. ■



▲ Fountains are a point of neighborhood pride – and expense.

How it works

State law requires the creation of a local board to manage the revenue. The Woodruff Place Economic Improvement District Board will consist of five to seven members, all of whom must own property in Woodruff Place, with a mix of single-family and rental properties represented. Policies, budgets, assessment rates and project management will be handled by the board.

The board is required to conduct an annual audit of its funds, and each year prepare a budget for the coming year, for approval by the City-County Council. An annual report must also be submitted to the City-County Council

Who pays what

Types of property	Annual assessment
One-family residential	\$165
Two-family residential	\$165
Three-family residential	\$165
Commercial, 4-19 units	\$247
Commercial, 20-39 units	\$494
Other residential structures	\$82
Vacant platted lot	\$41
Tax-exempt property	\$0