

SLC's east side adds two historic districts, but west side still has none

Neighborhoods on Yalecrest's Laird and Princeton avenues took a new approach on historic preservation to win over the Salt Lake City Council.

By TONY SEMERAD

Salt Lake City's newest historic districts are, in a way, a break with the past.

The City Council has approved two new districts in the east bench's Yalecrest area along Laird Avenue and Princeton Avenue east of 1300 East, adding a pair of posh and placid residential neighborhoods full of mature trees and stately English cottages and Tudors to the city's roster of 14 existing districts.

A third part of Yalecrest, known as Upper Yale, gets a hearing before the city's Historic Landmark Commission in early June on becoming, subject to council approval, an official district as well.

Residents behind these moves say they've faced an onslaught of historic home demolitions in their neighborhoods amid the city's ongoing development spurt, often followed by construction of larger so-called McMansions they contend are out of character with their surroundings.

Similar worries have prompted efforts over a decade in Utah's capital to create new historic districts through the city's lengthy application process, sometimes sparking contentious debates and even opposition from the Utah Legislature.

But this time has marked a departure, neighbors and elected officials say — with public debates before the council's March approval more focused on affordable housing, social equity and the notion of sustainability, rather than wealthier residents pulling up a drawbridge.

BALANCING HERITAGE WITH AFFORDABILITY, EQUITY

Instead of seeking to exclude accessory dwellings or added housing density, residents behind what are now called the Laird Heights and Princeton Heights districts say they've sought an extra layer of protections for affordable homes already there — with an eye not just on their backyards but on the city as a whole.

"Neighborhoods like ours have become less affordable and more exclusive over the last 10 years," Laird Avenue resident and district backer Becky Woods said, adding that home prices there were "unattainably high for most

families."

"We feel that protecting these smaller family-sized homes," Woods told the council recently, "is important to preserving whatever affordability may still exist within our neighborhoods."

They emphasized the ecological benefits of conserving older, more durable homes, thereby cutting greenhouse gas emissions by keeping tons of demolition waste out of landfills and reducing the need for new construction.

"Princeton Avenue," district supporter Tim Erniest told the council, "can serve as a model of balancing heritage conservation and environmental responsibility."

Laird and Princeton residents also framed their campaigns within a bigger picture of equity for the city's less-advantaged communities, one that has brought renewed attention to creating new historic districts on the west side, where none exists.

Paula Harline, a proponent of the Princeton district, said the process energized her and others to back similar applications for neighborhoods across the city. Harline said she is now advocating for that as a board member of the Preservation Utah nonprofit.

"My vision would be that before the [2034 Winter] Olympics come, we need to define the neighborhoods in Salt Lake City and tell their stories so that visitors can see who we are here," Harline said. "We're a collection of immigrants."

That more nuanced and recalibrated perspective ultimately garnered unanimous support from the council, where several members were said to be initially skeptical.

Council Chair Victoria Petro, also a former member of the city's Historic Landmark Commission, said she worried early on that Yalecrest residents might be reaching for historic status as a way of saying "not in my backyard" and preempting new affordable housing incentives from taking effect.

Instead, Petro said last week, "now I'm fully convinced that in the people who brought forward both these applications, we have allies to solve problems like affordable housing and to work across the city to make sure that this dignity is lent to everyone."

'IN SHOCK'

Large swaths of the city's east and west



A home in the Yalecrest-Princeton Heights Historic District is shown on May 22.

sides are designated as national historic districts, a largely honorary marker given by the National Park Service. These national areas encompass much of Yalecrest as well as Capitol Hill, City Creek, South Temple, the Avenues, Fort Douglas and the University of Utah, Liberty Wells, Benson-Douglas, Bryant, Central City and parts of the Granary District, and northwest neighborhoods such as Fairpark and Rose Park.

But only portions of those are also designated as local districts, which require added review by the city's planners and preservationists of things like exterior changes and proposed demolitions, with a view to saving historic architecture and neighborhood character over time.

The new Princeton Heights and Laird Heights districts adjoin others already locally designated in Yalecrest, such as Harvard Heights and Normandie Circle.

Princeton Avenue's runs from about 1323 East to 1500 East along that street, with 43 homes. The one on Laird Avenue extends between 1300 East and 1500 East, including Laird Circle and Uintah Circle, with 66 historic homes.

Both applications took more than a year to reach the council, with majorities of residents in both areas supporting them. Along the way, the city's planning commission recommended against Laird's application in September, with some members saying it threatened to block more housing density.

A few weeks later, the same commission approved the Princeton Avenue application, leaving some Laird Avenue residents stunned.

"We really just were in shock," said Kelly McLeer, a backer of the Laird Heights district. "But probably that was the best thing that happened, because it really did change the conversation."

'ABOUT COMMUNITY'

That shift in gears involved drawing on input and guidance from Chris Jensen, an architectural historian, historic preservationist and board member of Preservation Utah, who is also the spouse of City Council member Chris Wharton.

Jensen said he worked with the groups for free — and Wharton disclosed his role in a February meeting. Those involved say Jensen helped residents shift from past preservation approaches, which tended to emphasize the interests of affluent populations, toward a more people-oriented strategy with themes of connectedness, affordability and well-being. "Historic preservation has saved enough house museums and gilded palaces to a very white, bygone era," Jensen said in an interview. "Present preservation, to me, is about centering the community, the community's needs and what the community would like to see saved."

That, he said, is why preservation should be vital to the west side as part of recognizing the histories of disempowered and marginalized residents. He pointed to the World War II-era brick bungalows of Rose Park, where subdivisions are shaped like roses, and other neighborhoods.

"That is some of the last remaining affordable housing in Salt Lake," Jensen said, "and it's all historic and should be saved and protected under local historic districts."

This community-centered approach is now a key focus for Preservation Utah as well, according to its executive director, Brandy Strand.

"It's about breaking down what that perception of privilege is," Strand said, "and helping others who want to see their communities preserved and protected."

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