

Neighborhood History



The three neighborhoods in the NMCDC's traditional service area (the Land Stewardship Program is now available to serve the whole metropolitan area) are Missoula's oldest, comprising the original commercial and residential nucleus from which today's larger city grew. The Northside, Westside and residential Downtown developed largely because of their relationship with the Northern Pacific Railroad and St. Patrick Hospital.

Traditionally, a high proportion of neighborhood residents worked for the railroad, the Hospital or for the industries that grew up around the railroad yard. Once a thriving working class community surrounded with agricultural and range land, the neighborhoods suffered a series of adversities in the latter part of the 20th century that began a new period of disinvestment and decline.

Due to the will of the Northern Pacific, the grade-level crossings that joined the Northside to the Westside and downtown were closed in 1939 and replaced with a single underpass for both vehicles and pedestrians.

The interstate highway system came to Missoula and through the Northside in 1965, removing more than 60 residences and the Garden City Brewery, a Northside employer since 1895. An interstate highway interchange, located to take advantage of the railroad underpass, fragmented the neighborhoods at the same time that the interstate and its fences isolated the community from the North Hills' open space lands, the neighborhoods' traditional backyard.

The new highway system rang the death knell for the heyday of railroading. The wholesale grocery warehouses that lined the tracks closed their doors. The railroad closed and razed its Northside machine shops and roundhouse structures that once employed more than 300 workers.

What remained from the abandoned Railroad operations was enough contamination to create the neighborhood's first State of Montana Superfund Clean-up Site. In the early 1970's, Missoula's Northside Depot was decommissioned when Amtrak service to Missoula was discontinued.

As long-time neighborhood workers left in the 1960's and 1970's, their aging houses were bought cheaply and turned into rental properties. The School District closed the old Northside neighborhood school in 1985 to consolidate the neighborhood kids at the Westside Lowell Elementary. The Northside by that time was too politically disinvested to resist.



In 1996, a Northside manufacturing firm announced it was moving 60 sewing jobs to China in order to stay competitive in its market.

This announcement came just months after a Northside window and door manufacturer closed its already scaled back operation that had been a continuous neighborhood employer since before the turn of the century. At the same time that 80 jobs were lost, the neighborhood inherited its second state of Montana Superfund site.

The decline of the neighborhoods near the tracks created Missoula's lowest rent district and affordable, if sometimes substandard, housing was usually available there. In the 1990's this situation changed as well.

Responding to a region wide speculative land boom, housing prices across Missoula doubled in a decade. In the NMCDC service area rents and housing prices have more than quadrupled in little more than a decade - escalating at this even higher rate as more and more competition developed for low-end housing. At the

same time, relatively good jobs in extractive and manufacturing industries declined -- to be replaced by low paying jobs in the new service economy.

Despite the recipe for disaster chronicled above, there is a new breath of optimism in the historic neighborhoods. For the first time in decades realtors are reporting that young potential home buyers are interested in locating in the area. This is not just because the relatively lower cost houses are sometimes still found there but also because there is a sense of renewed vitality and community caring that is becoming more and more palpable.

The NMDCDC now faces the challenge of trying to preserve home ownership opportunities for people who earn what the local economy provides. There is a growing gap. The NMDCDC wants not only to foster neighborhood revitalization but also to recreate the neighborhoods as the secure working class bastions they once were.