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Henry Ford's Detroit Neighborhood Tries Hard to Keep Up Appearances

Boston-Edison Survived Riots, White Flight; Residents Hope to Weather Foreclosures, Too

By **JAMES R. HAGERTY**
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DETROIT -- The faded elegance of this city's Boston-Edison neighborhood, once the home of Henry Ford, has survived white flight, the 1967 riots that destroyed nearby shops, and the long decay of the U.S. auto industry. But three years ago, residents started noticing a disturbing trend: More and more of the stately homes were vacant.



Henry Ford

"We were losing our homeowners," says Ada Tinsley, a retired nurse who counts seven empty houses on her block. Elderly homeowners died or moved away. Speculators bought houses, then abandoned them. Longtime residents borrowed against their houses to pay off bills, then found they couldn't afford their mortgage payments. In the 36-square-block neighborhood, about one in five houses is now vacant, mainly because of foreclosures.


The foreclosure crisis has come as a sucker punch to thousands of neighborhoods across the U.S., from desolate cul-de-sacs in Las Vegas to thickets of mostly empty condo towers in South Florida. What's unusual about Boston-Edison is that the residents who remain are fighting back.

Organized by an 87-year-old neighborhood association, some do unpaid duty mowing lawns, trimming hedges and picking up litter outside vacant houses. Others park their cars in the driveways of empty houses to make them appear to be lived in. The association's Web site promotes mansions in need of new owners. Some members have volunteered to rush to the scene when burglars are breaking into empty houses.

Jill Thomas, a mother of two who works for her family's auto-parts salvage business, has lost count of how many times she and her neighbors have called the police about suspicious people, such as a man recently seen towing two shopping carts of scrap behind his bicycle. "911, they know my name," Ms. Thomas says.

Victoria Koski, who is home-schooling her two children in a Boston-Edison home with four bedrooms and a ballroom, wants banks that own foreclosed properties here to remember the neighborhood's high aesthetic standards. "There's a classy way of boarding up a house and a tacky way," Ms. Koski says. She suggests painting the boards in colors that blend with the stone and

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brick exteriors.

"We're simply trying to keep up appearances," Ms. Koski says.

Many neighborhoods will struggle to do that in the years ahead. Barclays Capital estimates that there are 811,000 bank-owned homes in the U.S., up from 129,000 two years ago, and predicts that the total will grow 60% more before peaking in late 2009.

Thieves mine empty homes for doorknobs, light fixtures, doors, radiators (attractive as scrap metal) and, especially, copper pipes and wiring. "Right now the city of Detroit is the biggest copper-mining location in the country," jokes Tom Ball, a real-estate agent here. Within a few minutes, these looters can cause damage that costs tens of thousands of dollars to repair.

In a few places, such as Boston-Edison, residents are taking matters into their own hands rather than waiting for political solutions. In Cleveland, a neighborhood group in the Slavic Village area organizes lawn mowing at vacant homes and encourages youths to paint cheerful designs on boarded-up windows. The city of Los Angeles is training neighborhood leaders to report signs of deterioration in vacant homes so action can be taken before blight spreads. Just Cause, a nonprofit group in Oakland, Calif., pressures utility companies not to shut off the water of tenants whose landlords are in foreclosure.

Boston-Edison has an edge over many other threatened areas because it has had an active neighborhood association since the 1920s. Neighbors know one another and can organize themselves for action.

Boston-Edison, named for two of the main streets that cross through it, is about four miles north of downtown and was on the fringes of Detroit when people began building houses here around 1900. Aside from Henry Ford, residents have included the labor leader Walter Reuther, Motown Records founder Berry Gordy Jr. and Sebastian Kresge, who ran the five-and-dime store chain that eventually became Kmart.

In the 1950s, African-American professionals and entrepreneurs began moving into what had been a partly Jewish neighborhood, and Boston-Edison today remains racially diverse. Plutocrats don't live here anymore. Middle-class people -- including teachers and young professionals -- restore houses built for the rich. One house has 11 bedrooms and nine bathrooms; others have such features as pipe organs or bowling lanes. Many still have buzzers for summoning the servants.

Neighborhood volunteers track down banks, investors or other absentee owners to urge them to take care of properties. In some cases, they report zoning and code violations to the city.

Houses for Sale

The idea is "to put pressure on the absentee owners to not just let houses rot," says Jim Hamilton, a retired economics professor who is president of the neighborhood association. But preservation alone isn't enough. "The only solution for a vacant home is a buyer," Mr. Hamilton says. The association's Web site (www.historicbostonedison.org¹) provides free ads for homes for sale, mostly in the range of about \$20,000 to \$200,000. The group occasionally organizes tours of available houses.

Then there is the charm offensive. Ms. Tinsley, a lifelong resident who lives in the three-story

brick house her grandparents bought in the 1950s, has been cooking meals for a new neighbor who is busy renovating a home he bought two months ago. "I tell people if they move into our block, I'll feed them for a year," she says.

Jerald Mitchell, a retired anatomy professor who lives in Henry Ford's old mansion, took it upon himself to defend a vacant house nearby. He removed mantels and light fixtures and stored them in his garage until a new owner arrived.

Ken Yourist, a graphic artist who has lived in the neighborhood for 10 years, last year began cutting the grass next-door when a foreclosure left it unoccupied. Eventually, he decided to buy the house for \$6,500. The previous owner had paid \$179,000 for it in April 2006 before defaulting.

To deter thieves, residents banded together earlier this year to hire a private security guard, Mike Mader, to patrol the streets 50 hours a week.

In Pursuit of Perps

On Aug. 4, Mr. Mader, making his rounds, noticed that the back and side doors were open at one vacant house. In the backyard lay a pile of radiators. Mr. Mader used his cellphone to call John Serda, a patrol commander for the Detroit police. About the time Mr. Serda pulled up in his car, two men jumped out of the house through a window and ran down an alley. Messrs. Mader and Serda caught up with the intruders a couple of blocks away, and Mr. Serda arrested them for trespassing.

The neighborhood group is installing motion detectors in some vacant homes and setting them to sound an alarm in a neighbor's home if someone enters. Ms. Koski, head of the neighborhood security committee, alerts neighbors by phone when suspects are spotted in or near an empty house. "We all get in our cars and mobilize," she says. The volunteers array their cars around the empty home, making it difficult for thieves to drive off before police arrive. Some people who participate in these "flash mobs" take pictures of the suspects' vehicles.

"We want to take our neighborhood back," says Amy Officer, a 38-year-old computer technician who has joined several of these expeditions. She hopes criminals will conclude that it's too risky to loot in Boston-Edison and move on.

Brian Ceccon, a social worker who keeps a database listing which of the neighborhood's 930 homes are vacant, sees reason to be encouraged. People have moved into 22 previously empty homes since mid-June, leaving about 185 unoccupied. Mr. Ceccon thinks the recent purchases are "a sign of better times ahead."

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