

## Nashville and Its Neighborhoods: Fanning the Flames of Place

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### NORTHEAST NASHVILLE

"We have isolated communities.  
Let's make them whole."

Raymond Thomas, community workshop participant

#### Then and Now

When Edgefield was incorporated as a separate city in 1868, the area north of the railroad tracks was called North Edgefield, according to the Metro Historical Commission's *Nashville: Conserving a Heritage*.<sup>1</sup> The area's history as an African American enclave began with the second contraband camp established by the federal troops in 1864. Without a bridge across the Cumberland--destroyed by retreating Confederates in 1862--the river was a barrier preventing thousands of fugitive slaves from reaching Nashville itself. "Because a major railroad ran through the community," writes historian Bobby Lovett, "the Union army used the contraband slaves there to build repair shops and warehouses on the eastern side of the river."

In 1880 Edgefield was annexed into Nashville; by 1908 the city limits had reached what is now Douglas Avenue. Rapid growth was delivered by the streetcars; the main line traveled along First Street and Dickerson Pike, another drove through the neighborhood via Meridian Street and Lischey Avenue before reaching Douglas.

The McFerrin Park neighborhood is south of Cleveland Street, its focal point the park that began as the Meridian Street play-



Aerial of Northeast Nashville showing how the area is isolated by interstate and Ellington Parkway; dashed marks show the locations of vehicular access. The "spaghetti junction" where Ellington Parkway, Spring Street, Dickerson Pike and the interstate intertwine is a pedestrian no-man's land in which walkers teeter precariously on the sides of roads to access East Nashville and the bus route on Main Street. (Diagram over photograph, 2004: NCDC, Gary Gaston)

ground at Meridian Street and Grace Avenue in 1909. The park moved to its present location on what had once been the farm of John B. McFerrin, a Methodist Church leader, in 1920.<sup>2</sup> The Cleveland Park neighborhood is north of Cleveland Street and takes its name from the park that was part of the Nashville Housing Authority's urban renewal program in East Nashville, and was given to the Park Board to administer in 1963. Be-

<sup>1</sup> Historical information from Historical Commission, *Nashville: Conserving a Heritage*, 55-57

<sup>2</sup> Parks history from Johnson, *Parks of Nashville*, 236, 245-46

tween Douglas Avenue and Trinity Lane are the Highland Heights and Avondale neighborhoods. Trinity Lane forms the northern edge of Northeast Nashville and lies in the midst of what was the plantation of Thomas Talbot, an early settler and innkeeper whose family cemetery is now in the interstate right-of-way.

The historic “main street” of these neighborhoods is Dickerson Pike, which dates to the late 1700s when Robert Cartwright, a Revolutionary War soldier, was appointed by the Davidson County Court to build a road from Nashville to Mansker’s Station in Goodlettsville along what had been a buffalo trail. The Dickerson name came from a misspelling of the last name of Jacob Dickinson, who founded the Dickinson Meeting House, a primitive Baptist Church, on the route. As the main road into the city from the north--some 19th century maps refer to it as Louisville Branch Pike--the street developed with a continuous line of mixed-use and commercial buildings. Many workers at the lumber mills on the East Bank lived in frequently flooded bottomlands at the southern end of the pike, in a black shantytown whose colloquial name--“Crappy Shoot”--is a good indicator of the living conditions.

Large blocks of public housing replaced shanties in 1953, but failed to improve the public perception of the area. In the 1960s the interstate severed Northeast Nashville from the river, and Ellington Parkway superseded the railroad tracks as the barrier to the rest of East Nashville. Today Northeast Nashville is as effectively barricaded from the rest of the city as a walled medieval town.

This isolation has made Northeast Nashville the city’s undiscovered country. The basic neighborhood fabric is of good urban design: a regular grid system with alleys. Most of the streets--especially those south of Douglas Avenue--have sidewalks, mature trees and on-street parking. The housing stock is generally of good quality, though much is in need of moderate repair, and there are few vacant lots. The area is scattered with churches, schools, community centers, and small commercial

centers. Historic structures still standing include the McGavock-Gatewood-Webb Home (early 1800s), the White-Joy home (early 1800s with 1890s addition), the Tony Sudekum home (1890s), Joy’s Greenhouse (1879) and the Trinity United Methodist Church (1852). A higher percentage of owner-occupied homes and strong neighborhood organizations would be major aids to revitalization.

The close proximity to downtown and the river, as well as the affordability of the real estate, make Northeast Nashville a prime candidate for preservation, restoration and redevelopment.



Map showing the proposed changes in the Plan of Nashville (Drawing, 2003: NCDC)

The Plan for Northeast Nashville concentrates on establishing a network of connections to the river and East Nashville. The long term goal is the transformation of the interstate into an urban boulevard (see “Weaning Ourselves from the Highway: The Four-Step Program in the REGIONS chapter of the *Plan of Nashville*) that would provide new investment opportunities for the district. More immediate strategies capitalize on the area’s adjacency to the Cumberland, and create new civic space at the terminus of Ellington Parkway as a focal point for the district.

### Natural Features

The Cumberland River forms the natural western edge of the Northeast Nashville neighborhoods. The Plan transforms the layer of industry and interstate that segregates these neighborhoods from the riverfront into a mixed-use

neighborhood and public park. Industrial uses and warehouses, which are not dependent on access to the river, relocate to more appropriate settings. The new development connects to the existing neighborhoods of McFerrin Park and Cleveland Park by streets with generous sidewalks and bikeways.

Cumberland Northeast Park features playing fields as well as non-programmed open space for more informal recreation. The Park is traversed by Riverside Drive, a low speed pedestrian-and-bike-friendly street that echoes the course of



the river and connects to the East Bank greenway to the south. The Park is designed to serve not merely as an amenity for local residents, but as an attraction for the larger community in the manner of Shelby, Centennial and the Warner parks. Cumberland NE Park also has a pedestrian bridge to the west that connects to the Neuhooff complex (“River District”), home of the Nashville Cultural Arts Project, and the East Germantown mixed-use neighborhood. (For further information on linking east and west banks, see “Embracing the Cumberland River, in the “Regions” chapter of the *Plan of Nashville*).

The creation of the Cumberland NE neighborhood is enabled by the transformation of I-24 in Northeast Nashville right-of-way into an urban boulevard (see “Weaning Ourselves from the Highway: The Four-Step Program in the REGIONS chapter of the *Plan of Nashville*). This neighborhood is of medium density--appropriate because of the large amount of public open space nearby for the use of the residents--forming a transition zone between the high density of downtown and the lower densities of the traditional fabric east to Dickerson Pike. The walkability index of the neighborhood is high and there are easy and efficient connections to the public transit system. Cumberland NE also benefits from the revitalization of Dickerson Pike (see “Neighborhood Centers “below), which serves as

the zipper street connecting the existing neighborhoods with park and river.

The Ellington neighborhood lies at the new terminus of Ellington Parkway (see “Neighborhood Centers” below); its character is mixed-use with a higher preponderance of commercial uses than Cumberland NE. The neighborhood is home to East Station, a multimodal transit hub.

To the interior of the district, heading north, the topography features increasingly rolling terrain, which provides beautiful vistas of downtown. The views of the skyline along Dickerson Pike are some of the best in the city. As with the River District, this topography should be protected--steep slopes should remain undeveloped--and vistas considered when planning new development.

## The Hierarchy of Streets

### PRINCIPAL STREETS

*Dickerson Pike* as the northern gateway into the city for commuters as well as for long-distance travel was replaced in the 1960s by the interstate. The commercial and social life of the

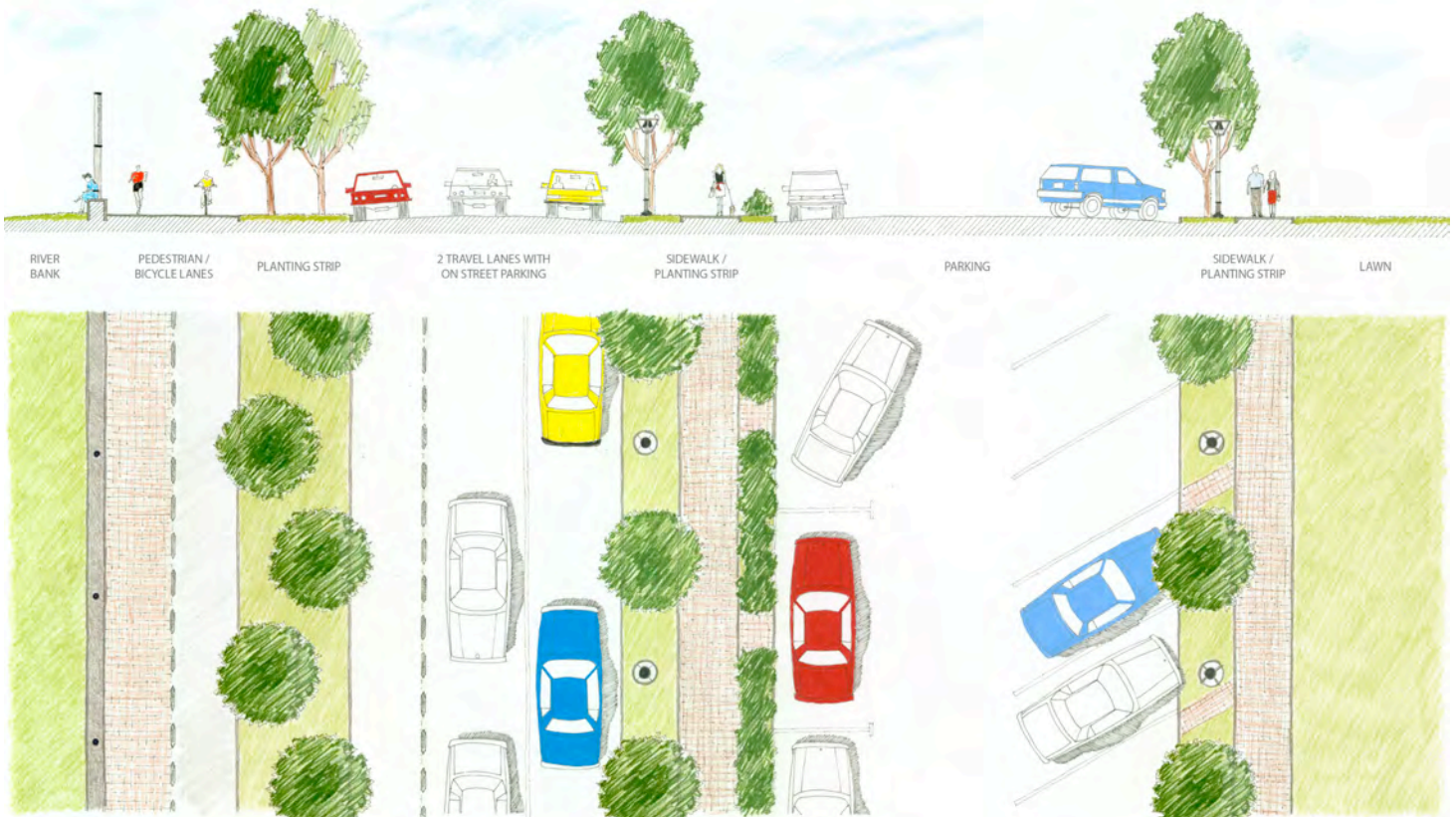


Illustration of Cumberland Drive. Top image is a section through the drive; lower portion is the plan. (Drawing, 2004: NCDC, Jason Hill, Gary Gaston)



Cumberland River and I-265 bridge from Cowan Drive; the riverfront in Northeast Nashville is underutilized, but has great natural beauty. (Photograph, 2004: NCDC, Gary Gaston)

pike rapidly declined, becoming infamous for its prostitutes and drug dealers. Today the Metro Development and Housing Agency is targeting Dickerson Pike with grants to create jobs and expand business opportunities (see “Neighborhood Centers” below).

**“The Cumberland River needs to be clean on both sides. You don’t wash one ear and leave the other one dirty.”**

Ray Dayal, community workshop participant

Numerous impediments to developing the urban character of Dickerson Pike include deteriorated sidewalks, fences running to the edge of sidewalks, front-loaded parking with frequent curb cuts, and vacant lots littered with debris. These conditions create a visually disheartening and pedestrian-unfriendly at-



This section of Dickerson Pike illustrates the street’s problems: continuous curb cuts, eroded sidewalks and hostile environment for mass transit users. (Photograph, 2004: NCDC, Gary Gaston)

mosphere. For those who rely on mass transit, the situation on Dickerson is even worse. There are only three bus stops between Douglas Avenue and the southern terminus and no bus shelters.

Existing buildings vary widely, from structures in good repair to demolition-ready. Yet the pike’s excellent sightlines to the downtown skyline and its under-utilized capacity suggest that the street’s value as a gateway into the city makes it worthy of major redevelopment efforts.

As part of its strategy to bring economic development to Dickerson Pike, the Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency commissioned the Dickerson Pike streetscape plan to address the street’s negative elements. The plan has three focal points or centers: Dickerson / Spring Street, Dickerson / Cleveland, Dickerson / Douglas Street.

*Brick Church Pike* closely parallels the interstate in Northeast Nashville, which severely limits the street’s commercial viability and potential as public space. In the Plan for the Cumberland NE and Ellington neighborhoods, the historic pike becomes an urban avenue parallel to Dickerson Pike and a link to the East Bank.





Top: Historical image of Dickerson Pike at Cleveland Street. (Photograph, 1950: Metro Archives) Middle: Existing conditions of Dickerson Pike. (Photograph, 2003: NCDC) Bottom: View of proposed changes to Dickerson Pike. (Drawing, 2004: NCDC, Gary Gaston). This intersection was identified in the community workshops as a major focal point for the McFerrin Park and Cleveland Park neighborhoods. The Plan strengthens this intersection as a commercial center for the district, transforming pike into urban boulevard.

Top: Aerial view of Sam Levy Homes before demolition; note how the large masses of housing were placed on superblocks in a manner hostile to the street. (Photograph, 2003: Metro Planning Department) Bottom: Plan for Sam Levy Homes; note the attempts to restore a traditional street pattern by the addition of several new thoroughfares and the placement of the housing facing the street. (Map, 2003: Barge Waggoner Summer Cannon, Inc. for Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency)

*Cleveland Avenue*, a major link to East Nashville across Ellington Parkway, is extended to Cumberland NE Park and neighborhood in the Plan.

## LOCAL STREETS

Among the local streets that feature sections of good urban design and sections in need of restoration are Douglas Avenue, which runs east/west, and Lischey Avenue and Meridian Street, both running north/south and traversing the McFerrin and Cleveland Park neighborhoods.

## Neighborhood Centers

*Ellington Parkway* at its southern terminus is currently a tangle of ramps that participants in the community workshops referred to as “concrete spaghetti” (See “Spaghetti Junction,” in the REGIONS chapter of the *Plan of Nashville*). The citizens overwhelmingly demanded that this area be reclaimed with a pedestrian-friendly design of urban character. Participants also expressed grave concern about Tennessee Department of

Transportation plans to convert the parkway from four to six lanes for the purpose of diverting traffic from the overloaded interstate. The citizen vision for the terminus was that of a traditional urban surface street, and for the rest of the road a true “parkway” in the manner of the thoroughfare through Washington, D.C.’s Rock Creek Park, with picturesque landscaping and paths for walking and biking.

The Plan endorses the “Rock Creek” vision, suggesting limits on development and lighting levels flanking the roadway to enhance a park-like atmosphere and the addition of a commuter rail line in the right-of-way (See “Regional Transit,” in the REGIONS chapter). In addition, the Parkway should be bridged in many more locations to create better connections with East Nashville.

For the terminus of Ellington Parkway the Plan presents an urban avenue that connects to Spring Street and East Boulevard (which replaces the interstate; see “Weaning Ourselves from the Highway: The Four-Step Program in the REGIONS chapter of the *Plan of Nashville*) via a roundabout. East Station, a multi-modal transit hub, is located adjacent to the roundabout, making this intersection a major activity center--“Midtown East.” The station is the first city stop for commuter and intercity trains approaching Nashville from the north (Hendersonville, Gallatin, Bowling Green, Louisville); passengers can transfer to local public transit, or exit and walk to home or office--or to a Titans game at the stadium.

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## Housing

Existing private housing in Northeast Nashville is predominantly single-family detached homes of good urban design.

Because this housing defines the district’s basic physical character, the fact that much of it is rental property and in need of repair is a cause for concern. As with the River District, major efforts should be taken to preserve housing stock through better codes enforcement and the development of financing mechanisms for rehabilitation. Vacant parcels should be redeveloped with new infill that respects the district’s traditional urban character. These goals could be more easily accomplished with the formation of active neighborhood associations.

Constructed in 1953, the public housing of Sam Levy Homes--480 units on 30 acres-- had devolved into a chronic source of crime and violence in Northeast Nashville. In response, the Metro Development and Housing Agency sought and received a federal Hope VI grant for the transformation of this housing project, to be replaced with more traditional housing types of lower density--226 duplexes and townhomes--and to include 45 market rate units to bring more economic diversity to the site. Demolition began in July 2004 and new construction will be completed in late 2005.

The MDHA plan for Sam Levy Homes is a tremendous improvement over the former housing project, and will ultimately have great positive effects on the rest of the neighborhood. But the site’s lack of connection to the adjacent neighborhood was outside the scope of this plan. Until the surrounding street system is reformed, to calm traffic and enable better pedestrian access to the site, the area will remain isolated. This reformation is an issue for the Tennessee Department of Transportation and the Metro Public Works Department. TDOT plans to add more lanes to Ellington Parkway have been halted in the wake of citizen protests, but new plans have yet to be revealed.

From *The Plan of Nashville: Avenues to a Great City*.  
Vanderbilt University Press (Nashville) 2005.