

HOW ALBION COLLEGE'S NEIGHBORHOOD

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The Power of the Porch

By Lorin Ditzler

REVITALIZATION EFFORTS ATTRACT TALENT

After living in 14 places over the past seven years, Professor Allie Harnish was ready to put down roots. “A log cabin in the woods... a tent [in Zambia]... eight different houses... I’ve felt like I’ve been living out of a suitcase.” But as a new professor at Albion College, she didn’t think she could afford to buy a home. That is, until her employer made her an unusual offer: they would sell her a newly renovated home next to campus...for \$25,000. They only had one request in return. “As students [walk] down the street, maybe Allie will be sitting on her porch and they’ll strike up a conversation,” explains Jerry White, coordinator of the college’s Harrington Neighborhood Project. The college is offering significant financial support to faculty and staff for the purchase or construction of homes in the Harrington Neighborhood, a 25-block area next to campus. The hope is that the proximity will create more spontaneous “front porch” moments with students.

“I call it serendipitous learning,” explains Albion College President Mauri Ditzler. When you run into a professor on campus or on the street, he says, “you talk to them about something in your class, or something in politics or something in the world. We find that our most successful students spent a lot of time having [these] conversations.” Ditzler says that informal interactions between faculty and students—while walking the dog, buying groceries, or sitting on the front porch—are a hallmark of successful small town liberal arts colleges.

For Charles Moreau, an Albion professor building a new home through the program, the opportunity to connect with students is part of the appeal. “We like to do things like have cookouts for our students. I think [living next to campus] is conducive to that.”

The college hopes to use the program as a way of attracting talented faculty and staff. That means using it as a recruiting tool, but also making the best use of existing talent. “If a [current] faculty member moves a half hour closer to campus, that is talent acquisition,” says Ditzler.

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Creating New Memories

Michael Harrington, funder of the project and an Albion alum, hopes there will be more like Moreau. “We have important memories of sitting on the front porches of faculty members, talking about all sorts of things,” recalls Harrington. “And we’ve lost that a bit...since faculty have decided to live outside of Albion.”

Harrington and his wife, Judy, provided a \$1 million gift, the project’s sole funding. In a town where the median home price is less than \$60,000, that money will go a long way. The gift allows the college to purchase the property from the homeowner or the Calhoun County land bank; pay for major repairs (roof, electricity, plumbing); and provide the purchaser with a \$25,000, 5-year forgivable loan for a renovated house, or \$30,000 toward the construction of a new home.

Of the three houses that have been renovated so far, says White, the average post-renovation appraisal was \$48,000. Add in the loan from the college, and buyers like Harnish are essentially getting the house for half price. Ditzler predicts the project will continue full speed ahead. “We could do 40 houses and probably will.”

Expanding The Bounds of a Public-Private Partnership

Albion’s devalued housing market is another one of the reasons why the College started the project. This town of 8,000 has struggled economically for years, and the 2008 housing crisis hit them hard. As values plummeted, it no longer made sense to invest in renovations, and the city’s older homes deteriorated.

“We were to the point that housing cost more to rehab than what people thought they would get out of it,” explains John Tracy, director of planning, building and code enforcement for the City of Albion. New housing construction stopped completely for nearly a decade.

The Harrington project is one of many efforts the college has made recently to revitalize the community, including orchestrating the development of a \$10 million downtown hotel and ongoing efforts to attract a healthcare clinic. When the college approached Harrington about the need to improve housing options, he realized it was an important piece of the revitalization puzzle.

“Housing would bring families into the community, including school age kids. It would create consumers for local shops and stores, consumers for the hotel, consumers for an eventual healthcare outlet,” says Harrington. “We’re really hoping that all of this lines up into a virtuous circle of economic development.”

Participants in the Harrington project share that vision. “I really believe strongly in the college and community working together for revitalization,” says Marc Roy, the provost at the college, as he plans to start construction of his home in the neighborhood. “When the Harringtons made their gift, I thought: I can help set the example.”

Housing programs like this one are not a new idea, but Albion’s program is unusual because it is run by a private entity rather than the city. The college is diving deep into public territory, making plans to pave the street, add sidewalks, and install street lights.

Leaders at City Hall are glad to have the help. “We’re thrilled that the college is being a leader in expanding the housing alternatives,” says Albion’s City Manager Sheryl Mitchell. “There are things that are the natural responsibility of the city that we are simply not in the position to afford.” Albion’s population—and tax base—have been decreasing for decades.


Fortunately, the city’s position is improving, she says—in part because of the partnership with the College. New residents are arriving and housing values are rising. “We’ve finally hit bottom and we’re...moving in a positive trajectory.”

Signs of Success

The program is still in the early stages—six homes have been renovated and a handful of empty lots are available—but there are already signs of success. College-funded renovations have inspired other property owners in the neighborhood to make improvements, too—from full renovations to simply trimming the shrubs. “There’s probably as much renovation going on by other people as by us,” says Ditzler.

Tracy explains: “As houses are rehabbed and rebuilt [by the college], that raises your values in the area. So the investment into it can be recouped.” Homeowners finally have enough confidence in the neighborhood that they’re willing to spend time and money on their property.

“There’s far less trash and debris around town,” adds Mitchell. “People are starting to take pride in their neighborhood.”

The College realizes that the Harrington program isn’t for everyone. With so many renovations to complete, “you have to have some imagination to move into these houses,” says White. However, for those that do, there are a heap of potential benefits: an affordable mortgage; a meaningful connection to the campus and community; and the chance to be part of Albion’s budding revival. 

Lorin Ditzler is a freelance writer and city planner living in Des Moines, Iowa. She is also the daughter of the Albion College president. You may contact her at lorinditzler@gmail.com.