

OPINION

Olympia Fields: All that, and free college tuition too?

A group of 10 Olympia Fields residents is taking offence to a recent story in the Tribune suggesting there are a lot of run-down houses in their village. They say the problem is ridiculously exaggerated and they live in one of the best spots in the country. The residents are:

-Matthew Sosnowski, a construction manager, who has lived in the village for five years.

-David Mekarski, the village administrator who has lived in the village for three years.

-Geraldine Tyler, who works in the corrections field, who has lived in the village for seven years. She has six children.

-Ilene Waite, a Web site builder, who has lived in the village for 21 years.

-Celeritas (Larry) Green, a public safety coordinator for Metra, who has lived in the village for 17 years.

-Pat Collier, owner of two car wash and detail shops, who has lived in the village for 11 years

-Kay Mangan, a homemaker and volunteer, who has lived in the village for 37 years. She has eight children.

-Susan Gatlin-Moroney, who worked in the human services field before retiring and has lived in the village four years.

-Craig Martin, a project manager for Resurrection Health Care Hospitals, who has lived in the village for six years.

-And Bob Waite, a businessman with several interests, who has lived in the village for 21 years.

The Tribune story that the residents are concerned about appeared on Aug. 25 and gave voice to an activist, Eugene Broyls, who has lived in the village since 1993. He has formed a group called SHARP – See, hear, and Report to the Police – and he likes to patrol the streets, photographing houses that he says violate the local maintenance code. Broyls told the Tribune:



MICHAEL BOWERS
Star columnist

"Why should I have to go out and find these problems? I didn't have to do that when I first moved here."

He adds: "Until my last dying day, they can't shut my mouth. What we've seen is a more... laissez-faire, laid-back attitude from the village. There are things I'm seeing that I'm not happy with. Olympia Fields needs a coat of paint"

The 10 neighbors believe Broyls is suggesting Olympia Fields is a slum and the village is not addressing the issue. They say that's a bum rap on their mayor, Linzey Jones. They want to smother this argument before it gains any credibility.

The truth, they say, is that there are just five or six run down homes in the village of 5,500 people, which has an average income of \$127,000, more than twice the Cook County and state average.

Mr. Collier, the car wash owner, compared Broyls to a father who complains that amidst all A grades, his daughters report card contains one B or C.

Mr. Sosnowski the construction manager, fears Broyls argument will critically damage the village. He says that if people buy into it, they won't shop for houses in Olympia Fields. They will believe that "our community is second-rate and inferior—and that's absolutely false":

The residents believe a lot of the problem comes from unconscious racism and a misunderstanding of diversity in the village, which is half-white and half-black.

In Olympia Fields, they say, diversity does not mean crime or anything like it. Instead, it means affluence, pride and friendliness. "People aren't snooty around here," said Mrs. Waite. "We really are such a neat mix:

Mr. Martin said District 162 has excellent schools, such as Arcadia Elementary, where 100 percent of students meet state standards for math knowledge.

Mr. Mekarski the village administrator, believes his home combines the best aspects of Oak Park, for its diversity; Evanston, for its quality of life; and Lake Forest, for its character.

But, Mekarski says, not everyone realizes this. The area has a hard time attracting major retailers. Stores such as Borders, Sportmart and Linens 'n' Things moved into neighboring Matteson only after they got 50 percent tax abatements.

Other attributes the neighbors are proud of include the natural beauty of the village, which is home to doe, bucks, red foxes, gray foxes and lots of green space. It was also the site of the U.S. Open golf tournament in 2003.

And the neighbors like the low cost of housing. One of the group told me that a two-story brick house with four bedrooms would cost \$500,000 to \$550,000. In Skokie or Lincolnwood, the same house would cost almost twice as much, and it would sit on a smaller lot, to boot. (Though they did acknowledge the Skokie Swift makes it a lot easier to get to the loop)

All this and free college tuition too?

The village board recently established a 15-member education commission to look into the possibility of adopting a revitalization plan from Kalamazoo. This spring the Michigan City started a program to pay for the higher education of any student who enters its school system by ninth grade.

According to a Wall Street Journal story from March, "Kalamazoo Promise" will cover schooling at any state college or university, including Michigan-Ann Arbor, where in-state tuition now runs \$9,000 a year.

High school graduates who have attended Kalamazoo schools since kindergarten will get a full tuition ride. Those who have attended since freshman year will get a 65 percent tuition ride. (Students are on their own for room and board-)

Kalamazoo expects the program to cost \$3.5 million in its first year and eventually rise to \$12 million a year. It's sponsored by wealthy anonymous donors.

Does Olympia Fields have wealthy anonymous donors of its own? The neighbors I met with are confident they will find them. They plan to become the Kalamazoo of Illinois.

The Star will watch as the program progresses and write about it in the future. In the meantime, this might be the time for you to start pricing houses in Olympia Fields. They've got me interested, and I don't even have a kid.