

Inventing (and Uninventing?) West Mt. Airy

by

Marc Stier

West Mt. Airy Neighbors (WMAN) and East Mt. Airy Neighbors (EMAN) have invited members of the community to join the Boards of each organization at our annual joint meeting, which will be held Tuesday, January 13, 2004, 7:30 p.m. in Hagan Hall of the Lutheran Theological Seminary, 7301 Germantown Avenue. The purpose of this meeting is to begin a discussion about the future of the two organizations. Among the topics we will discuss is the possibility of merging the two organizations. In order to encourage the broadest and most inclusive discussion, the meeting will be led by a professional facilitator who does not live in our community.

This meeting was prompted by a committee appointed to discuss the ongoing relationship between WMAN and EMAN. Derek Green, the president of EMAN, and I encouraged the two boards to form this committee earlier in the year. Our aim was not to push the committee, or our two boards, in any particular direction. However, Derek and I were aware that, because WMAN and EMAN were working together on so many joint projects, some discussion had to take place about how best to manage these projects. In order to coordinate our joint activities, Derek and I were talking and meeting more and more frequently. Since we are friends, and rarely disagree, this in itself was no problem. But we did wonder whether coordinating our joint projects would become more difficult when we both leave office. And we were also concerned that the demands of managing our common efforts was putting too much control in our own hands.

(If truth be told, one other issue has pushed us in this direction. At the moment, WMAN and EMAN do not have one decent copying machine between us.)

There will be many things to consider when we meet next week to discuss how WMAN and EMAN should best work together. I don't want to stifle the broadest possible discussion by saying anything here about most of these issues. But there is one question to which I have given some thought that I do want to raise here: the impact of a WMAN-EMAN merger on the founding mission of our organization, the creation of a racially integrated community. I want to say a word before the meeting about this issue because my discussions with some of the earliest leaders and members of WMAN have taught me something about our history that might be useful in our deliberations.

I will not argue here for the importance of the founding mission of WMAN. I will just say that the creation of a racially integrated community in Mt. Airy was an extraordinarily important achievement. Nothing those of us who lead WMAN and EMAN do today will ever match it. And it is an achievement that is widely appreciated: Our diversity is the first thing practically mentions when talking about why Mt. Airy is a great place to live.

While WMAN has a broad range of concerns today, everything we do is always evaluated in terms of our mission to sustain and enhance the diversity of our community. And it is well that we do this, for the forces that make for racial

segregation—the forces that the founders of WMAN and EMAN fought so hard against—are still at work, although they are far weaker than they once were. In particular, from time to time, we hear of examples of racial steering in the real estate market. In almost all cases, it is realtors from out of the area who engage in this appalling practice. The policy of our local realtors, and in almost all cases their practice as well, is to support integration and diversity. But there are realtors outside Mt. Airy who take a different view. And, even where our realtors encourage integration, they and we operate in a country that is still a long way from overcoming racism. In a country in which racially integrated communities are rare, we can never rest easy in the fight to preserve special places like Mt. Airy.

(To those who doubt that racial steering still goes on, let me offer one piece of evidence: It happened to my family. Our first realtor—who was based on the Main Line—told us not to look at houses in a certain part of West Mt. Airy. When I asked her why, she said, “I am not allowed to say.” But that, of course, was a good as saying it. We found a new realtor the next day. But, I am sorry to say, we didn’t report our first realtor to WMAN or the government. I urge any of you who have a similar experience to let us at WMAN and EMAN know about it.)

It was in dealing with the issues of integration and racial steering that the founders of West Mt. Airy Neighbors created the community we today call West Mt. Airy. It sounds odd to say that West Mt. Airy was invented. But this is what I learned from some of the founders of WMAN. The origins of most communities are usually hidden in the mists of distant history. But the origin of West Mt. Airy can be dated. As I understand it, in the 1950s Mt. Airy was the name given to a fairly ill-defined area in the northern part of Germantown. There was no more a West (or East) Mt. Airy than there is today a West or East Chestnut Hill or a West or East Germantown.

In creating West Mt. Airy Neighbors, the founders of our organization invented our community. And they did it, at least in part, deliberately. Their aim was to draw a line between their community and Germantown. This was a common response in the 1950s and 60s to the kind of racial turnover that was rapidly transforming mostly white communities into mostly black ones. But, to the undying glory of the founders of WMAN, their aim in inventing West Mt. Airy was not to create a white enclave but, rather, to create an integrated community. They actively welcomed African Americans into the community while just as actively encouraging whites to remain.

What WMAN did in inventing West Mt. Airy was completed when the creation of EMAN led to the invention of East Mt. Airy. Even though most of us travel from one side of the Avenue to another—and many of us have lived on both sides—the sense that we live in two distinct communities is hard to escape if only because we have two distinct names and two separate community organizations.

The question I want to put forward is this: Having invented West and East Mt. Airy about forty years ago, is it time for our two organizations to uninvent them? Even if we grant that the East-West distinction once served an important purpose, has it outlived its usefulness?

To answer this question will require some thought and discussion. I do have a sense that, in so far as the founding purpose of WMAN is concerned, the East – West distinction creates more problems than it solves. When racial steering goes on today—or when racism influences the choices people make about where to live—it often draws upon this distinction. Whites are steered, or steer themselves to the West side of the Avenue, African Americans to the East. If we started thinking of ourselves as just Mt. Airy, wouldn't we rid ourselves of a distinction that has come to be a barrier to diversity?

At the same time, if we become one community, wouldn't we find it easier to focus on a more important distinction, the uneven economic development between the northern and southern parts of Mt. Airy? This is something that EMAN and WMAN are working on today. But it might be easier for us to do so if we give up the usual categories we use to think about Mt. Airy.

I know there are people who take the opposite view. I have heard people argue that the success of integration in West Mt. Airy rests on the long standing balance between whites and blacks. Since East Mt. Airy has a higher percentage of African Americans than West Mt. Airy, a united Mt. Airy would have an African American majority.

In my view, this fear is misplaced. I think the positive experience of the integrated community in which we live is so strong that whites in Mt. Airy can acknowledge the truth about the racial balance in our larger community. And I think that we can more easily appeal to new residents, white and black, to move into all parts of Mt. Airy, if we do not draw lines that, to my mind, are becoming ever more artificial.

There are other views, of course. I encourage them all to be expressed next week. And, of course, my own view about this issue does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that WMAN and EMAN should merge. There are many other issues to consider, including the all important copying machine question. I do urge, however, that we not lose sight of what to me is the most important issue, sustaining and enhancing our diversity.