

Renter Power? Local bloggers are aiming to take back the city from home owners.



Readers of arborupdate.com know that the weblog's founders and principal contributors have a strong "New Urbanist" bent. They favor more downtown density and support the Downtown Development Authority's "three-site plan" to consolidate and redevelop parking areas west of Main Street. And they oppose the concept of the greenway—at least as put forward by Old West Side home owners, who want to turn the entire First and William parking lot into a park.

Now the bloggers are launching an ambitious political organizing effort. They say they want to counter home owners' clout on development issues—and also to advocate for renters on such issues as parking restrictions, noise violations, housing code enforcement, and couches on porches. The effort is led by U-M grad student Dale Winling, supported by Arbor Update regulars "Murph" (Richard Murphy), Brandon Zwagerman, and Scott Trudeau. Winling notes that students are the majority of the population in some census tracts. Yet, he believes, city council is more responsive to the traditional neighborhood groups dominated by home owners. So Winling, a doctoral candidate in architectural history, is trying to organize alternative neighborhood groups for students and renters. The first fruit of the effort is the New West Side (newwestside.org), whose geographical area essentially overlaps that of the Old West Side Association.

Student involvement in city politics has been intermittent and only occasionally successful. That's partly because of the city's wedge-shaped wards, which divide the student population around Central Campus and dilute its political clout, and partly because of students' transient lives.

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Scott Trudeau and Richard "Murph" Murphy resist the "home owner culture."

Christine Crockett of the Old Fourth Ward Association notes that most neighborhood groups consist of people who have lived in the same house for years or even decades. Those long-term residents, she says, just want to have a clean, well-kept, safe place to live. She considers those values universal.

The bloggers disagree. "The New West Side is not wedded to tradition or a mythologized history that empowers home owners by promoting their 'permanence' in the community," newwestside.org asserts. And some of the values Crockett considers universal the bloggers reject as an attempt to impose a "home owner culture." A hot-button issue for the organizing effort was last year's proposal to ban couches on porches—which Winling describes as "an attempt by organized home owners to push their values" on students. More recently, the proposed North Burns Park residential parking district has been criticized in Arbor Update, for reasons varying from views on transportation planning to simple resentment of home owners' "my front yard" attitudes.

Winling hopes the New West Side will be the first of a citywide network of alternative neighborhood groups called the Ann Arbor Alliance. He envisions it as a sort of congress of student-and-renter neighborhood organizations, giving a permanent voice to concerns that range from

Back Billed



Michigan education officials have asked the Ann Arbor Public Schools to refund \$13 million in state school aid.

The organizers say the current supermajority of Democrats on council is not responsive to renter issues. Their ultimate goal is to place students or sympathizers at every level of local government—from the planning commission and historic district commission to city and county elected positions.

Local school officials agree they may owe as much as \$7 million, but not the full amount. "We are going to challenge if their numbers don't match our numbers," says superintendent George Fornero. Negotiations have been under way since the state demanded the money in March—but Michigan Treasury audit supervisor Jim Mills says he's seen no proof yet that the \$13 million figure should be substantially revised. The back-billing is part of a broader campaign to retrieve millions of dollars overpaid to local school districts since 1994. State officials say the problem be-