

Trusting in preservation

Neighborhood concerns brought them together.

Story by Janel Van Beek · Photography by Joan Kappes

Since the Water Tower Landmark Trust's first meeting on Aug. 9, 1973, its focus has remained steadfast in preserving the character and lifestyle of one of Wisconsin's premiere urban areas. The Water Tower Landmark Trust (WTLT) was formed in response to the physical expansion of St. Mary's Hospital campus.

With the merger of St. Mary's and Columbia hospitals, the WTLT has new concerns for its members. Each month, the WTLT board meets with hospital administrators and architects. The trust also works with the mayor's office, the Department of City Development, and its own specialized committees.


Handling the hospital expansion is not an easy endeavor for either party. Board member Barbara Elsner explained that the planning committees of St. Mary's admit that there are architectural and structural challenges due to the way the campus was originally designed.

WTLT's district extends from Lafayette Place in the south to Edgewood Avenue in the north and extends west to Downer and Summit avenues. The district has over 200 families on its roster; about 181 homes that are over 100 years old and 921 homes built prior to 1950.

"One of the most important goals we've reached is to have the majority of our district on the historic register on the national, state and local levels, which has many benefits, including tax credits for improvements. The value of our neighborhood is definitely a value to the state," says WTLT board member Jeff Bentoff. "We are a one-of-a-kind neighborhood. People realize that we are a historical district and that's one of the reasons why they now move here. Younger families are attracted to the area."

Board member Mary Wasielewski moved into the area in the 1970s. When St. Mary's and UWM had planned expansions, she became involved with the WTLT. "At the time, many people were buying houses and turning them into duplexes and boarding houses. Now, people are buying homes valued at over \$1 million. It's very exciting to see how everything from the landscaping to the home has been upgraded. We don't see our historical designation as a burden." Wasielewski also said that compared to when she first moved into the area, there is far more activity in Lake Park.

"It's an asset that everyone is now using. Years ago, some people used to be concerned about walking through Lake Park. That is not the case any more because everything is revitalized."

The WTLT is not simply focused on residential preservation. When one of the oldest buildings in the area was at risk to be torn down, the WTLT stepped in to help. "With over 1,500 signatures, we assisted in saving a very old building on the St. Mary's campus," Bentoff said. "We also used our united efforts to keep the Downer Avenue district from becoming a strip mall." 



Jeff Bentoff, past president of WTLT, Mary Wasielewski, president and Barbara Elsner, founding member.