

## Park Support Groups of Baltimore City: **The Neighbors of Library Square**

Patterson Park is an area in the midst of a long-overdue comeback. This distinctive Baltimore community made it through the hard times of section-8 housing and boarded up businesses, and now finds itself enjoying increased interest and a slowly blossoming renaissance. To most city residents, the neighborhood is best known for the 155-acres of parkland from which it gets its name. But there are other green spaces that help weave the community together as well. One of these is Library Square, a triangular strip of land that stretches from the Patterson Park branch of the Enoch Pratt Library on one end to a Spanish American war monument on the other. Until recently, this small park was quite plain and rarely used. But the Neighbors of Library Square (NoLS) aim to change this state of affairs.

Formed in January of 2004, NoLS was originally organized as a project of the Neighborhood Design Center (NDC). Residents from the neighborhood were recruited to solicit ideas from other community groups, devise a plan, and implement it in the Square. The result was new, artistic benches and mulching around gardens at the front of the library. The project was completed in August of 2004, and that might have marked the end of the group. However, a few dedicated participants decided to keep NoLS going.

As of this time, the Neighbors are still a rather informal organization. Monthly meetings are held in the basement of the library, with records of membership consisting solely of a sign-in sheet and an email list. The group does not yet

have legal status as a non-profit, and uses a local community association as a fiscal agent. This situation is likely to change in the next year or so, as the Neighbors finish laying the groundwork for their bylaws.

What NoLS lacks in established structure is made up for in vision, solid planning and design expertise. In October 2005, the group created a master plan complete with professional architectural sketches. This document states the commitment of the Neighbors to providing a forum for the community (a hefty task, as the park sits at the intersection of five different neighborhoods). It also lays out a plan for developing Library Square into “a safe, vibrant, recognized area” that can serve as a recreational spot, host events, and support local businesses.

The members of NoLS have set a high bar for themselves, and are making progress steadily towards their objectives. Clean-ups are held in the park in conjunction with each meeting, and have served to make the Square more pleasant for those passing through. The Neighbors took a big first step in the fall of 2005 by applying for and receiving two different greening grants through the Parks & People Foundation. One was a Partnerships for Parks grant, administered by Parks & People and funded by the Baltimore City Department of Recreation & Parks, and covered plantings around the city-owned monument. The other covered similar work on the rest of the space, which belongs to the library.

Some significant challenges face the Neighbors as they move forward. Heavy vehicle traffic to the north and the south isolate the Square. Many residents of the surrounding neighborhoods don't know the small park's name, or even that the building which stands adjacent to it is a library. Undoubtedly, the biggest issues facing the group are the things it lacks at this early stage in its development: committed volunteers, monetary resources, and community recognition.

One of the strongest factors in NoLS's favor is the presence of a number of other effective, established community organizations in and around Patterson Park. Among others, the group is

supported by the Friends of Patterson Park, who provide tools and expertise, and the Patterson Park Neighborhood Association, which allows NoLS to advertise in its newsletter. Perhaps the best ally of the Neighbors has been the Patterson Park Community Development Corporation, a non-profit organization that improves run-down houses across the area. The CDC has its sights on some defunct retail properties surrounding Library Square, and has incorporated the plans of the Neighbors into its overall strategy. The two entities recently co-hosted a public forum to solicit the input of residents as to what they'd like to see in the neighborhood.

**WHAT:** The Neighbors of Library Square

**WHERE:** Library Square in the Patterson Park community of east Baltimore City

**WHEN:** Since January 2004

**WHY:** To provide "a safe, vibrant, recognized area where neighbors feel proud to gather and spend recreational time enjoying educational and cultural activities as well as supporting locally-owned businesses."

Based on an interview with Tara Labosky and on information compiled during the summer of 2006.