

Benjamin Buckley

From: Jeffrey S Cowin <jeffreyscowin@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, December 12, 2022 8:09 AM
To: Historic District Commission (Staff)
Cc: Jim Hamilton; Devan Anderson; David Bell; SUSAN MOSEY; Jody Wise; paul mack; Francesco Esposito; Garrick Landsberg; Donna McGrady
Subject: Please don't demolish this substantial and sound home in Virginia Park Historic District
Re: 873 Virginia Park
Attachments: Virginia Park NR reduced.pdf; Freep 2012 Virginia Park P.1.pdf; Freep 2012 Virginia Park P.2.pdf
Follow Up Flag: Follow up
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Dear HDC Staff, HDC Commissioners, BSEED Director Bell, Group Executive Rencher and fellow community leaders,

For over a decade, residents of Virginia Park Street have been sporadically threatened by John Brown, a property speculator from Southfield. (It appears that Brown purchased 873 Virginia Park in 2009, for \$30k.)

As a block club and individually, we've communicated with every District 5 manager about this vacant house, starting with Vince Keenan and ending with Brian Fisher. Vince had 873 and several other vacant homes tagged for Nuisance Abatement. There has been no explanation for 873.

Oddly, a BSEED supervisor told me in August 2022 that our community is to blame for this homes demolition permit.

I've overheard speculation from BSEED staff that John Brown has some connection in the administration and is getting special treatment at our neighborhood's expense.

The Detroit Free Press, ten years ago, wrote about our neighborhood revitalization efforts, including the successful historic preservation that year of several homes that were in worse shape.

In that news story, the press interviewed our neighbor Tom Dickinson who had been living next-door at 899 Virginia Park since 1983.

Something had recently happened on the front lawn of Tom's home that "in that instant" determined he would relocate his family out of here.

The CCS graduate and career DIA art conservator, who meticulously restored his historic home on Virginia Park Street during 29 years here, had gotten married and was enjoying gardening in the yard with his wife Michelle one day.

Until that moment, they had never seen or heard of this man. John Brown showed up and pulled into the driveway of 873, right next to them.

Brown gets out of his white conversion van and within seconds he's yelling, he's let a dog out of the van, and he's firing a gun.

To this day, Tom and Michelle tell the story. I know that we lost great neighbors because of that carelessness. They moved away and eventually listed their home at 899vp for sale.

Not long after 899vp was listed on the market, Brown sent a crew to 873vp, and the men erected scaffolding all the way around the house. Next, they demolished the beautiful coved stucco soffit, disfiguring an otherwise beautiful home and leaving debris everywhere.

There had been nothing wrong with that soffit. It was made of stucco over steel mesh lathe. It was 98+% perfect. Nothing wrong that some basic maintenance and repainting wouldn't handle. What the house ached for them was new shingles and gutters.. still the case.

Our block club leaders and neighbors reported this destruction to HDC staff using the Improve Detroit App. We emailed photos to then District 5 Manager Melia Howard asking for help.

I spoke to Mayor Duggan at the charter mandated District 5 meeting in 2021, described what I could, and I recall the mayor asking staff if we still do nuisance abatement.

Staff did not follow up with me about 873, but I continued emailing and calling the district manager. If the administration did address any of this internally, we haven't been informed of it.

873 is a large home and stretches farther back toward the alley than the others. Please look at the view from Tom's back yard in the attached photo. Imagine trying to sell your home next to that mess. Note the existence of the west facing roof dormer in the photo. Brown destroyed that next.

But not before 899 Virginia Park sold to a new owner occupant. Welcome to the neighborhood, it's raining bricks next-door.

Brown sent a man who climbed the scaffolding with a hammer and spent all day destroying a large brick and stucco roof dormer that faced toward 899 Virginia Park.

While this demolition work is happening, chunks of wood and masonry are slamming into the driveway below. The debris was everywhere and there was no care on the part of Brown's worker for our neighbor's safety or property.

On August 31, 2022, I phoned BSEED to talk about this damage, which I could see from my home as well. I was connected to Supervisor Flemmings who told me a demolition permit had been in effect since August 1. He explicitly told me that HDC approval wasn't necessary and that demolition equipment could be showing up anytime. Flemmings blamed us, the neighbors, saying our complaints necessitated this demolition permit.

John Brown has refused fair market purchase offers from multiple unsolicited buyers over the years. Brown actually solicited an offer from me in May 2020, through a middleman. 873 was opened for me on two separate dates, so that my tradespeople could help estimate renovation costs. We have photos of the interior and notes covering all the systems. I emailed over a written offer which was rejected.

People want to move here, but there isn't enough quality housing. This vacant historic home is an opportunity to create quality housing faster and with less resource consumption than new construction.

Please deny Brown's demolition permit.

It's completely unnecessary to demolish 873. Plus, to do so would pollute our environment and squander the quality materials and design that make 873 a beautiful home and major contributing element in our historic district.

It's not in that bad a shape, but Brown has added at least \$50k to someone's future project cost with his crazy and unnecessary demolition of the soffit and dormer. Just a waste!

873 Virginia Park Street was added to the federal registry in 1982, along with the other historic structures and streetscape elements that we are doing our best to maintain for future generations.

For convenience, I've attached a pdf of Virginia Park Historic District's accepted application to the National registry.

I'm grateful for your hard work and expertise, HDC Commissioners and Staff!

I'm grateful for the important work carried out everyday at BSEED and for your leadership Director Bell, keeping our city growing and helping keep Detroiters safe! Thank you!

Why doesn't Brown just sell the house if he doesn't want it? I know that he has at least one purchase offer on the table right now.

I plan to attend the HDC meeting Wednesday.

Have a good day!

Jeff

Jeffrey S. Cowin
Resident 866 Virginia Park Street
President, Virginia Park Historic District
313-354-1868













On Dec 11, 2022, at 1:43 PM, James Hamilton <james.hamilton@wayne.edu> wrote:

Greetings Mr. Cowin,

I write to you as the President of the Virginia Park Block Club regarding 873 Virginia Park, which is on the HDC agenda for the meeting Wednesday, December 13. The staff report reveals that the neighborhood is aware of unapproved work done on the home.

I want to be sure that you also are aware of the pending application to demolish the house and garage. If you wish to make a statement of support for or opposition to this application, you should submit it to HDC staff as soon as possible at HDC@detroitmi.gov. Also, you may appear at the meeting to make a statement in person, either on the Zoom meeting or in person at CAYMC 13th floor.

In my experience, when the HDC has as much information as possible, we make better decisions. For that reason, I encourage the neighborhood to share their view of this application.

Access to the Zoom meeting, and the application for 873 Virginia Park are on the HDC website:

<https://detroitmi.gov/events/regular-historic-district-commission-hdc-meeting-12142022>

Respectfully,

James Hamilton
Commissioner, HDC

NOMINATE: Nominations are being accepted until June 29 for the Shining Light Regional Cooperation Awards. The awards recognize people making key contributions to "regional cooperation, progress and understanding in metropolitan Detroit," according to the awards website. Winners will be selected in August and honored at a breakfast Oct. 11 in Dearborn. Nominations can be submitted at www.shininglightawards.com. For more information, call Deb Scola, community affairs director for the Detroit Media Partnership, at 313-222-6895, or send an e-mail to info@shininglightawards.com.



AFTER TRIAL, SHE SHOULD'VE BEEN FIRST ON JOHN EDWARDS' LIST, ROCHELLE RILEY SAYS

Where was his thank you to Mrs. Edwards?

Johnny Reid Edwards is now a member of the club. You know the club—the one that most men would rather folks not know they've joined. Club members haven't decided on a name. People refer to them as The Fallen. But they're trying out The Redeemed.

Anthony Weiner joined last summer. "I've let down a lot of people. That's the bottom line," the former New York congressman said in his apology for sexting provocative photos. "And I let them down and in every instance I would ask their forgiveness."

Jesse Jackson joined the club in 2003.

"This is no time for evasions, denials or alibis," the Baptist minister said as he admitted an affair with a RainbowPUSH employee that resulted in a daughter.

He had the affair while counseling President Bill Clinton about his trysts with Monica Lewinsky. "I fully accept responsibility and I am truly sorry.... My wife, Jackie, and my children have been made aware of the child. ... I have asked God and each one of them to forgive me."

Gary Hart joined in 1987 but never really did experience contrition. The former Colorado senator announced that he was taking "total responsibility" for his affair with Donna Rice. Then he blamed the media. "I was not running for sainthood," he said.

So admission, but no cigar. That was the province of Clinton, whose admission was accompanied by a multimillion-dollar investigation and years worth of headlines.

Arnold Schwarzenegger joined in 2011 after admitting that he fathered his housekeeper's son. "I understand and deserve the feelings of anger and disappointment among my friends and family," he said then. "There are no excuses and I take full responsibility for the hurt I have caused."

But here's why I watched with little sympathy Edwards' post-trial news conference after a jury decided that he was not guilty of using campaign funds and falsifying documents to hide a pregnant mistress from his long-suffering wife and from a public that was considering making him president.

I wanted him to apologize to Elizabeth. In public. He said "God" through with him yet, but I believe the American public is. All one needs to do is remember the lies.

After denying an affair with a campaign staffer in October 2007, then having an aide claim to be his child's father a year later, Edwards finally acknowledged his child in January 2010. Eleven months later, his wife, Elizabeth died.

Seventeen months later, he thanked his oldest daughter, Cate for standing by him. He thanked his parents, whom he publicly shamed. Then Edwards, who faced as many as 30 years in prison and a \$1.5-million fine for his actions, stood before a microphone and did one thing he should. He claimed his 4-year-old daughter, his "precious Quinn, whom I love more than any of you could ever imagine."

But he did not do the other.... In the history of apologies—Jimmy Swaguer's sobbing sorry and Jim Bakker's sad, sad breakdown being at one end and Eliot Spitzer's at the other (Want to get a TV show? Have an affair and make your wife stand with you while you resign as governor of New York!)—the ones least believable are those from politicians.

Fallen ministers usually are seeking forgiveness and enough trust to keep you writing checks. Politicians usually are seeking redemption and another chance to disappoint you.

Edwards did the right thing. He acknowledged Quinn, who will one day know how many times he denied her.

But he should have thanked Elizabeth—and apologized to her one more time.

That's what all men should do—over and over—when they join the club.

CONTACT ROCHELLE RILEY: RRILEY99@FREEPRESS.COM

A stiffer GOP challenge for Obama

Mich. Republicans work to neutralize advantage president had in '08

By Kathleen Gray
Free Press Staff Writer

President Barack Obama had little trouble winning Michigan in 2008, with his dominance in Wayne County and Detroit ensuring a double-digit drubbing of Sen. John McCain, who bailed out of the state a month before the election.

But this year? Republicans have no intention of giving Obama a pass through the Great Lakes State.

Four years ago, as the Democratic candidate, Obama had every advantage, including fund-raising and a corps of highly visible surrogates, who offered camera-ready appearances on his behalf and money and volunteers from their political machines.

Think Gov. Jennifer Granholm, Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano and a new, if temporary, mayor of Detroit, Ken Cockrel Jr.

But this year, fund-raising is beginning to show parity with conservative super political action committees leveling the playing field for Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, a Michigan native who intends to contest the state all the way to Nov. 6. The PACs have spent more than \$5 million on anti-Obama ads in Michigan since Romney won the state's Feb. 28 GOP primary, while the PAC with ties to the Obama campaign has done only a small cable television buy.

And the prospective surrogates for Obama this time around? Granholm's gone, Ficano's politically toxic and De-

troit Mayor Dave Bing is neck-deep in the city's financial crisis.

Granholm is now a teacher and political talk show host in California. Ficano is so enmeshed in a corruption scandal surrounding his administration that neither he nor his substantial campaign coffers will be anywhere near Obama before the election. And Bing, who has little if any political organization, has more immediate issues than the presidential election.

All three have had close ties with the Obama campaign machine. Consider a recent Washington Post database of visitors to the White House. Granholm was there a dozen times in the last three years, Ficano visited twice and Bing has been there seven times since Obama's victory in Michigan.



CAROLYN KASTER/ASSOCIATED PRESS
Detroit and the rest of Wayne County were key in President Barack Obama's 2008 victory in Michigan.

DIY Detroit



Jeff Cowin sits in his favorite room of a house he is renovating. He says he is stabilizing his neighborhood.

ERIC SEALS/DETROIT FREE PRESS

Renovating for life

Man on a mission to get people moving to Virginia Park Street

By Megha Satyanarayana
Free Press Staff Writer

When Jeff Cowin walked into his first three-story mansion on Virginia Park Street in Detroit, he saw that Mother Nature and mankind had effectively destroyed it. Rain had soaked through the ceilings. Thieves had stolen the plumbing and whatever else they could find. The once-stately mansion, complete with servants' stairs, had been gutted. And on the December 2010 day he moved into the neighborhood, it was cold, the streetlights were out, and not a soul was in sight.

On a street peppered with derelict mansions in a historic district, Cowin, 31, is one of several residents trying to re-energize the neighborhood by revamping the houses. With the help of his partner and tenants who see Detroit as less of a wasteland and more a land of opportunity, the former BMW mechanic has purchased and restored two houses on Virginia Park near Woodward and is in the process of buying a third. He's gone door-to-door, introducing himself to his neighbors, and has held block club meetings at his house, listening to longtime residents talk about what made this old neighborhood once the place to be.

"The goal is to make this neighborhood awesome, and really awesome, and to not go broke and end up living in a gutter," Cowin said wryly, crediting community organizations such as Midtown Inc. for supporting his efforts.

He found the first house as a real estate



BEFORE: Cowin has renovated two houses and is in the process of buying a third.



AFTER: He put \$110,000 into this one, which he bought from a bank for \$19,000.

agent showing it to a buyer, but then buying it himself for \$25,000. The second house, which he bought from a bank for \$19,000, was one he walked by all the time, troubled by its gaping roof and crumbled stairs.

He's averaged about \$125,000 each in repairs and restoration, and rents the houses to young professionals that span the gamut of

new Detroiters, including young suburbanites who want to be part of the city's evolution, Midtown employees taking advantage of the Live Midtown program and even visiting doctors from India, slated for work at nearby medical centers.

His neighbors are hopeful he will succeed, See DETROIT, PAGE 5A



BEFORE: The kitchen of the house Jeff Cowin bought, renovated, and lives in had buckled counters and uneven floors.



AFTER: Cowin said he averages about \$125,000 each in repairs and restoration. He rents rooms to young professionals.



Gordy Petrovski, 42, of Dallas drove his Cadillac CTS-V wagon 18 hours to get to Detroit. He is at the Cadillac car corral at Belle Isle.

DETROIT: Man on Virginia Park mission

FROM PAGE 4A

even as some wonder whether that he's doing is worth it.

"They are like a godsend, but it's kind of too little too late," said Thomas Dickinson, 56, of Cowin and other people rebuilding houses on the street. After 29 years, he and his wife are moving out of the neighborhood to the suburbs.

Virginia Park Street runs from Woodward west to Grand River and I-96, cutting through several neighborhoods, including its namesake. The stretch from Woodward to the Lodge Freeway is part of the Historic New Center area, and is a mix of occupied and abandoned single-family homes, apartments and even a vacant hospital.

To its residents, this chunk of Virginia Park Street is in great shape compared with what surrounds it. One street north has lots littered with trash, and vacant and uninhabitable houses. One street south, an empty apartment building looms, coupled with newer homes and vacant ones.

"This neighborhood is no different," said Hyvert McGrady, 65, a retired Ford engineer. "You move forward three steps and back two."

He moved with his wife to the area 20 years ago, into a 4,000 square foot house renovated by General Motors in the 1980s.

It was safer then, he said. Wayne State University police and GM's private security patrolled, in addition to Detroit police. But GM left. Detroit police are less responsive. The McGradys thought about moving in 2008, but the market tanked and they stayed.

McGrady and neighbor Jarvis Williams, 29, a lawyer, said any effort to restore the houses is better than letting things diminish.

"We want every one of them to have someone in it," McGrady said.

As does Cowin. He is frustrated that with a dozen vacan-



Wayne State University junior Nikk Laughlin, 21, waters the grass in front of the house he and others rent from Cowin, who also lives there. He is one of several people re-energizing the neighborhood.

"IF ANYONE CAN DO IT, JEFF CAN."

THOMAS DICKINSON, 56, who said he sees a lot of himself in Cowin. Dickinson and his wife moved into the Virginia Park neighborhood 29 years ago to make a difference. But they are moving to the suburbs now, he says, because it's gotten too bad.

Everything is owned, either by what he calls deadbeat investors waiting for an uptick in the market, or the city or county. He thinks three houses were sold in the recent county tax auction, and since then, they haven't been touched. So the houses rot, he said, while his phone rings off the hook with potential renters moving to Detroit.

"I'm putting more money into these houses than they are worth," he said. "I'm more about stabilizing the neighborhood. If they're not going to bring the property up to code or activate it, sell it to a nice family or rent it to good people."

A house waiting for demolition sits across from Paul Mack, 28, who lives in the block of historic Virginia Park Street closest to the Lodge Freeway. He and his wife moved into their house last April.

"It was an absolute disaster area," he said of the foreclosure the couple purchased for \$9,000. "It wasn't protected from the weather. There was no heat, no furnace, no water heater and no plumbing."

So, room by room, they are making repairs while Mack tries to find a trustworthy contractor to help.

Like Cowin, Mack, who works for Teach for America, sees the potential — in the house, and the neighborhood.

"There are times when I'm like, 'Why didn't I just get a loft downtown?'" Mack said, "but I'd rather be living in a community and put sweat equity into a community."



DETAIL DETROIT 12th Virginia Park 14th 16th 18th 20th 22nd 24th 26th 28th 30th 32nd 34th 36th 38th 40th 42nd 44th 46th 48th 50th 52nd 54th 56th 58th 60th 62nd 64th 66th 68th 70th 72nd 74th 76th 78th 80th 82nd 84th 86th 88th 90th 92nd 94th 96th 98th 100th Grand River Woodward I-96 1/4 mile

SEE MORE PHOTOS OF RENOVATIONS ON VIRGINIA PARK

That was the same thinking that led Dickinson to move onto the street, fresh out of the College for Creative Studies. He sees himself in guys like Mack and Cowin, wanting to make a difference and trying to make a life in a city that so many have left.

But his wife, Michele Shoha, 45, has had enough. The crime, the break-ins, the man who shot at their dog, the men who hassle her while she's gardening; it's all too much.

"I'll miss what we've created here," he said.

And while Dickinson won't be around to keep fighting for the neighborhood, he said guys like Cowin, now contemplating a plan to restore the streetlights on the three-block stretch, can carry that fire for him.

"If anyone can do it, Jeff can," he said of helping the community.

Cadillac eyes global growth for its racing

Fans can see brand prove itself on track

By Brent Snaveley
Free Press Business Writer



Cadillac Racing, in the middle of its second year as part of the SCCA Pro Racing World Challenge, is eyeing an expansion of its racing involvement around the globe.

"We'd like to be able to race in China; we'd like to be able to race in eastern Europe, and there are a number of series that allow you to do that," James Vurpillat, global marketing manager for Cadillac, told the Free Press on Saturday at Belle Isle in Detroit.

Cadillac, which was involved in racing prior to General Motors' bankruptcy in 2009, was forced to cease all racing activities for several years as the automaker recovered.

But Mark Reuss, a racing enthusiast and president of GM North America, wanted to get Cadillac back onto the racetrack as quickly as possible after the company emerged from bankruptcy, Vurpillat said. For brands like Cadillac, motorsports provides an ideal place to connect with enthusiasts and to prove to others that the cars they sell are among the best in the world.

With just nine months of preparation, Cadillac Racing returned to the track in 2011 to participate in the SCCA World Challenge. The World Challenge is holding two races in Detroit at Belle Isle this weekend, including one today, that are supporting the Chevrolet Detroit Belle Isle Grand Prix. Other races are held across the U.S.

The racing series requires cars to resemble production vehicles. About 80% of the parts in Cadillac's race car are the same as the parts in the Cadillac V production cars, Vurpillat said. Cadillac competes against brands such as Porsche, Nissan and Volvo.

That close resemblance to production cars is important to Cadillac, Vurpillat said, because it helps to convince race fans that the performance on the track is related to the performance on the road. In fact, Cadillac will consider racing leagues similar to the World Challenge as it considers additional racing activities, Vurpillat said.

"As we go on to expand the brand, the cornerstone of Cadillac will be performance ... so as we go into those markets, we will look for avenues to show that performance and show those credentials," Vurpillat said.

Cadillac sponsors a car corral at racing venues such as Belle Isle so Cadillac owners can park at the venue, have access to food and can meet members of the Cadillac Racing team.

It costs Cadillac owners \$250 to participate in the corral for one day and \$350 for both days. Grady Petrovski, 42, of Dallas drove his Cadillac CTS-V wagon 18 hours to get to Detroit.

"I got in yesterday, and I came to Belle Isle right away," Petrovski, who grew up in Farmington Hills but moved to Texas in 2000, said Saturday.

Petrovski came to Belle Isle Saturday with his father, Zlate Petrovski, who retired from GM in 2006. He is planning to return today with his wife and children.

Both Grady and Zlate Petrovski said they view the races at Belle Isle as good for both Cadillac and the city of Detroit.

"It's a nice area," said Zlate Petrovski, 67, of Farmington Hills. "You can see the GM building from here, and there are nice visuals."

CONTACT BRENT SNAVELEY: 313-222-6512 OR SNSNAVEY@FREEPRESS.COM

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Cadillac marketing executives James Vurpillat, left, and John Kraemer, are in the Cadillac car corral Saturday next to a V-Series race car.

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