

Somerset to Celebrate 100 Years of Charm

In Montgomery, Preserving Trees and a Sense of Community

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Special to The Washington Post
Saturday, September 24, 2005; G01

When the Maryland General Assembly granted a municipal charter to the town of Somerset in Montgomery County in 1906, the community was home to 35 families. Its biggest challenge, next to establishing a property tax assessment system, was replacing a broken sewer pipe.

According to a history of the town published by the Montgomery County Historical Society, a special committee assigned to investigate the problem reported that the main sewer was "little more than a terra cotta pipe that emptied directly into Little Falls Run, was found to be broken in numerous places, a health hazard, and in need of repair."

As Somerset prepares to celebrate its centennial next year, the community of 413 single-family houses just north of the District along Wisconsin Avenue has worked to retain its residential character and small-town flavor. And despite enormous development pressure along the corridor, the town has preserved its 12-acre park, which is managed as a wild area.

But the town, which in the 1980s de-annexed land rather than allow condominium and commercial development in what is now part of Friendship Heights, is experiencing growing pains of a different variety. Increasingly, homeowners are either gutting or leveling the older colonials and more modest ranchers to make way for much larger structures.

"It's happening on every street," said Pat Silbert, a painter who moved to Somerset with her husband and three children in 1981.

Silbert loves Somerset's "fabulous location" between Bethesda and Friendship Heights, but she conceded its proximity to great shopping and restaurants probably makes tear downs of some of the older housing stock inevitable.

Somerset Mayor Walter Behr understands the concern of those who worry that tearing down older houses means losing a link to the past and forever altering the community's architectural landscape. However, Behr, 88, who was first elected mayor in 1975, said he would readily accept the authority, were the state to grant it, to impose "a slight reduction in the height allowance," which he believes would help the town ease the problem of newer, larger houses towering over older, smaller ones.

The town's prime geographic position is also contributing to a dramatic escalation in average home prices. Since March of this year, Long & Foster real estate agent Phyllis Wiesenfelder and her partner Cindy Chambers have sold a rambler for \$1 million, a

1920s log cabin for \$935,000, and a contemporary designed by local architect Mark McInturff for \$2.1 million.

When Somerset marks its 100-year anniversary in a ceremony next April, it will be celebrating the vision that five federal scientists had when they bought 50 acres of farmland and laid out five short streets named after the English counties of Dorset, Warwick, Surrey, Cumberland and Essex.

The town's founders, like other entrepreneurs of the day, were essentially "creating an enclave in the woods. . . . The interesting connection [in Somerset] is the scientists and their interest in a healthy environment," said Gwen Wright, historic preservation supervisor with the Montgomery County Department of Park and Planning.

The establishment of Somerset, dozens of whose oldest houses are now designated one of Montgomery County's 20 historic districts, represented the "first step in the suburbanization of Washington," Wright said.

What is remarkable about Somerset today, she noted, is not simply that it has continued, but that it has "thrived and it still has a strong sense of neighborhood and a strong sense of community" in a transient part of the country.

But for Behr, there is still much work to be done in Somerset. He can be found early most weekday mornings on the tennis courts playing doubles matches, but then he heads straight across the parking lot to Town Hall.

A former labor economist with the now-defunct federal Wage Stabilization Board, Behr finished his professional career as a sales manager. These days, he focuses on three major capital improvement projects: a Town Hall renovation, construction of a community center and major street repaving. All three projects will be completed, he said. "It's just a question of when."

Behr takes great pride in Somerset's municipal status, and emphasizes its ability to offer "superior services" to residents.

With an annual operating budget of about \$800,000, Somerset employs a full-time clerk/treasurer, three full-time maintenance workers and a part-time office assistant. The town does its own snow removal, contracts for trash collection and recycling, maintains sidewalks and streets, and runs a tree planting and maintenance program that Behr described as "10 times better than the county."

In keeping with its status as a "Tree City USA," every tree planted and maintained by the town bears a metal tag and has pruning and feeding records. Even on private property, residents must apply for permits from the town to remove trees.

"We're very serious about our trees here," said Lesley Anne Simmons, a Town council member and chair of the town's history committee.

Residents also have access to recreation facilities including a town swimming pool that is paid for through taxes, tennis courts that families pay \$5 per year to use, basketball courts, and batting cages. The Capital Crescent Trail bike path that runs from Georgetown to Silver Spring is nearby.

Ask about the community's central features and some residents will cite the sidewalks and bike path. Others mention easy access to good restaurants and upscale retail. For still others, the most important features have more to do with the spirit of Somerset and its people: the outreach to new residents at the annual welcome party each fall or the festivities surrounding the closing of the pool, which seems to occur later every year and culminates in a farewell-to-summer swim by the town's dogs.

Nearly everyone, even those without children, agrees Somerset Elementary School, founded in 1928 and rebuilt and reopened with 395 students in August, is what binds the community together. Behr, a father of four, began his civic involvement as president of the Somerset Elementary PTA.

Zola Dincin Schneider, an independent college adviser and author, has been a dues-paying member of the PTA since moving to her house just across from the school in 1962. On her second day in her new house, the principal walked over to welcome her.

"She said, 'I know you're going to be happy here. I want you to be head of the building and grounds committee.'

"I was a city girl. I knew nothing about gardening, but I couldn't say, 'no,'" recalled Schneider.

She and her husband, Irving, raised three sons in their gracious 1902 Victorian, which is in the town's Historic District. Because their middle son, Norman, bought the home of a childhood friend in Somerset, the Schneiders also have been able to mark the milestones of three grandsons as they started kindergarten, learned to ride bicycles, passed their driver's tests and, in the case of the oldest, left for college.

Paul Schneider, 16, sat on his grandparents' porch one day recently and talked about what it meant to grow up in the same town as his dad and attend the same schools. Now a junior at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, Paul recalled the days when he walked home from Somerset Elementary. "It's nice to be near your grandparents. . . . We'd stop in to get a snack on the way home. It was pretty neat."