

Upgrading spaces

Naperville's home rehab market shows no signs of slowing

By **Larry Avila** – As published in the *Naperville Sun* December 14, 2005
SUN STAFF

Debra and Doug Lellbach saw a lot of potential in the home at 1423 Druid Hills Court in Naperville.

"Initially when we bought the house, we thought we'd renovate it then resell it," Debra Lellbach said during a recent open house she and her husband hosted at the property. The two operate Lellbach Builders, a Warrenville-based home renovation company.

But they couldn't let the house go.

"When we got in the house, we really saw some opportunities. Plus, we felt, structurally, it was very sound throughout," she said.

That's when they decided to keep it for themselves.

The interior will change to open up the first-floor living space of the 30-year-old, two-story home in the Cress Creek neighborhood. The exterior will undergo an extensive renovation, but the "footprint" of the building will not change.

Lellbach said additions will add about 1,000 square feet but that the change will be subtle from the outside. For example, a deck behind the home will be removed and living space built in its place.

The interior of the house, which Lellbach described as 1980s contemporary, will feature more current decor throughout.

"It wasn't necessary to tear down the house to do what we wanted to do," Debra Lellbach said. "We've done a lot of renovations in this neighborhood and we lived here before we bought this house, so we're sensitive to maintaining the character of the neighborhood."

Residential redevelopment and renovation have been active in Naperville for several years.

Between January and November, the city of Naperville issued 461 building permits for residential additions and alternations. That's 133 more than were issued for the same time last year.

The city estimates the value of the residential additions and alternations for permits issued between January and November at \$36.5 million, nearly \$17 million than for the same time last year.

Debra Lellbach said she and her husband are neither for nor against the practice of tearing down old homes and rebuilding but feel that sometimes a piece of land can be used differently.

"Tearing down sometimes is the right answer," she said. "Our perspective, however, is to look at a project and what we can do within the parameters of the existing home. If we can accomplish what we want to and the existing home won't get in the way, that's great."

This also is the philosophy of Community First, a volunteer group of residents who advocate for "smart" redevelopment and preservation of a neighborhood's character.

"We aim to foster and enhance an understanding that new homes should fit in well in an existing neighborhood," said Steven Albert, president of Naperville-based Civil Design Group and chairman of Community First. "We recognize that redevelopment is a good thing for the community. The alternative to redevelopment is no redevelopment, which we feel is much worse."

Albert said Community First wants to educate builders about maintaining a subdivision's character. The Naperville City Council approved a measure in early December outlining a partnership with the group and urging residential development that is compatible with existing neighborhoods.

The partnership means the city and Community First will host workshops for developers on Community First's guidelines for redevelopment, outlined in the group's workbook. Workshop attendance is not mandatory for developers.

Albert hopes workshops will be hosted quarterly.

"The workbook is a guide on how to fit a large house into a smaller-house neighborhood in a way that's not overly aggressive," he said.

For two years, Community First has organized the Community Choice Awards, which highlight redevelopment projects that best fit the group's criteria. Albert said the group is planning another contest for the coming year.

He said Naperville residents are the primary investors in residential redevelopment projects in town.

"Many people do think that it's out-of-town builders coming in, but it's mostly in-town builders and in-town residents who want to live near downtown," Albert said.

Lellbach said she and her husband have enjoyed living in Cress Creek over the years and hope to remain in Naperville for many years. She expects the rehabilitation of their home to take four to six months.

"We will work on our home as we work on other clients' projects," she said. "We've seen our clients go through the renovation process, so it will be nice for them to see us go through it ourselves."

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