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Developer hopes name helps sell neighborhood

BY CHRISTOPHER BURBACH  
 WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Leytham? What's a Leytham?



The Leytham development is designed with streets that mix single-family homes with row houses.

That was planning consultant Robert Peters' reaction when real estate developer Herb Freeman revealed the name he had chosen for suburban Omaha's first so-called "new traditional" neighborhood.

Freeman was running a contest to name the unusual development he plans to build at 168th and State Streets. He had offered a \$500 prize for the winner. More than 100 names were suggested, many of them by

people who participated in workshops to design the development.

Freeman answered Peters' question with a query of his own: "What's a Dundee?"

Peters had to concede the point. Freeman wants the name to help sell the idea that the development he's building is unlike anything built around these parts for more than 50 years.

Leytham was the name of the English immigrant family who first owned the land in the 1860s. By Freeman's etymological estimation, the family name also describes what he's trying to build. "Ley" could come from the Middle English word "leah" — for meadow — and "ham" from the Old English word for village.

"A village in a meadow," Freeman said.

That describes what he wants to build, he said. And it conveys that he's trying to take Omaha, or at least his 160 acres northwest of Omaha, back to the future.

Besides acquiring a name, Leytham has taken significant steps recently toward moving from concept to reality. Engineers' plans nearly match those sketched during last fall's design workshops. And the project received enthusiastic support from city planners and Planning Board members when it began its trek through the city approval process last month.

"This is the coolest thing I've seen in my nine years on the board," Planning Board member John Hoich said.

And Planning Director Steve Jensen called it a "first-class project that really does aspire to all the ideals of New Urbanism."

"We have been hoping and wishing and working toward someone being willing to step forward and do this in Omaha," Jensen said.

The project is expected to make its first appearance before the Omaha City Council in mid- to late July.

Before the car became king, such American neighborhoods as Dundee grew up with a mixture of houses, apartments and businesses within walking distance of each other.

An 8-year-old easily could walk to a store to buy a Popsicle. Mom didn't have to burn a gallon of gas to procure a gallon of milk. And streetscapes were dominated by homes and front porches, not garages.

Neighborhoods were places with their own style, history and character, Freeman said, which is why Omahans know the Dundee name, and why he believes they will come to know Leytham's name, too.

"New traditional" neighborhoods apply principles of a development philosophy called new urbanism. The first were built in the 1980s. Since then, they have sprouted across the country, and the trend is picking up in the Midwest. Two new traditional developments are under construction in metropolitan Kansas City. One, Village Gardens, just began in south Lincoln, Neb. Another, called Prairie Trail, is planned near Des Moines.

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Their developers seek to orchestrate the type of places that grew before World War II — compact towns and villages with common areas that encourage walking and a diversity of people and land uses.

Elements of new urbanism appear in plans for the former Ak-Sar-Ben racetrack site and a mixed-use development near Mutual of Omaha headquarters. But Freeman's Leytham would be the first full-scale new traditional neighborhood built from plowed ground up.

Freeman said Omaha is ready for an alternative to the type of monolithic housing subdivisions that have dominated the metropolitan area's suburbs for decades.

Freeman developed several of those subdivisions himself but wants to do something different with the 160 acres surrounding his hilltop home northeast of 168th and State Streets. He had planted the former cropland to prairie grasses in 1992, and planned to live there until old age. But housing subdivisions began popping up around his land faster than he expected.

"I had to decide whether I would sell it for development, not sell it, or try to do something different," Freeman said.

He has set about to set his development apart from the beginning. Last fall, he brought in national experts to work with local planners, officials and other interested people to design a master plan for his development.

They came up with a dreamy-sounding concept. Boulevards would wind around a town center with a large green space. Homes, stores and offices would cozy up to treed sidewalks. Alleys would carry cars to garages in back.

Homes of different sizes, and thus varying prices, would rise on irregularly shaped lots. Expensive estate houses could be next door to "apartment mansions" and little homes above garages, a la carriage houses. Three-story buildings called live-work units would house shops or offices on the first level, with the owners' living quarters above.

All around would be parks and gardens, small and large, with which neighbors could do pretty much as they please.

The idea has met with skepticism, Freeman said. And it's not for everybody. But he said national marketing studies have shown that such developments appeal to 30 percent of American homebuyers.

Workers could begin grading the site next year. The first homes could be built by 2009, Freeman said. He said he doesn't yet know what the price range of homes will be, or how long it might take to complete the development.

But now Freeman knows what to call it.

"The name is historically and etymologically relevant," he said. "I couldn't have written it fictionally any better."

The \$500 naming prize? Because Freeman came up with the name himself, he gave the money to Habitat for Humanity.

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