

JMU purchases most of neighborhood for over \$4 million

By Matt D'Angelo and Mike Dolzer | The Breeze
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Soft, fluttering wind chimes could be heard as Carmenza Kline looked around in the backyard she's called home for almost 50 years.

"My children grew up here; I planted all the trees here. It's my home; it's my home and I don't want to see my home, you know, go and become a building ... it means a lot," Kline said.

Kline, 71, is one of two independent homeowners in the Forest Hills neighborhood, a development tucked away among the Edith J. Carrier Arboretum, Forest Hills Manor and Interstate 81. Her neighborhood includes Forest Hill Road and Locust Hill Drive, as well as the north side of Hickory Hill Drive.

The private pocket Kline's home occupies has slowly been infiltrated by an institution that's caused unexpected headaches for her: James Madison University.

Over the last four years, JMU has purchased 14 homes in the 16-home neighborhood for approximately \$4.2 million, according to public housing records obtained by The Breeze. Bill Wyatt, director of communications and university spokesperson, said the area was purchased to provide JMU faculty and staff with the opportunity to rent homes from the university, and that there are currently no long-term plans for the area.

"Anytime a property becomes available that's sort of contiguous to campus," Wyatt said, "we'll consider, 'Do we have a need for it?'"

No student at JMU is foreign to the idea that the university is growing. In the past four years, the university has turned UREC into an almost 300,000 square-foot colossus; the Student Success Center has cemented itself in the JMU skyline; D-Hall's massive exoskeleton is under construction behind Wilson Hall; the Grace Street corridor has been transformed into a route peppered with JMU buildings and Sentara Park has been implanted as a massive sports complex outside of campus.

The university boasts a high rating among students according to The Wall Street Journal, but while many enrolled at JMU may be excited about recent growth, the costs and benefits of these changes are different to those in the Harrisonburg community.

Kline's situation is reflective of a problem faced by any resident who's spent decades in a college community: the issue of encroachment by the university may not be an "if," but a "when."

For Kline, this came in the form of land purchases by the university. Only she and another neighbor, Richard Sheppard, still own their homes in the area. While Kline, a native of Bogotá, Colombia, worked at JMU as a professor until 2013, she misses a time when the university was less present in her neighborhood.

“I have been here for so long. And I see how they [JMU] maintain the gardens now and how they maintain the houses,” Kline said. “I plant beautiful plants. The university is coming and tearing down all the trees.”

While the impact of JMU’s growth has been felt negatively by Kline, Sheppard — who lives adjacent to her on Forest Hills Road — sees the presence of JMU in his neighborhood as a normal occurrence.

“It’s only natural that the university needs to expand,” Sheppard, 63, said.

Sheppard has two sons who studied at JMU, and he worked as a professor in the political science department.

Although he has a lax attitude toward JMU’s presence, Sheppard has started to notice that it is surrounding him.

“I feel like I was an island unto myself,” Sheppard said.

Despite not being too fazed by JMU’s expansion, Sheppard has begun to consider selling his home to the university.

“I finally got my sons to agree that they didn’t have any plan to move back to Harrisonburg,” Sheppard said. “So I reached out to [JMU].”

While Sheppard considers, the university won’t be pushing to purchase the two remaining homes, according to Wyatt.

“There’s no plans to actively solicit those [houses] at this point,” Wyatt said.

In fact, according to Wyatt, the university hasn’t had to do much solicitation at all.

“How the ball got rolling with this neighborhood is one of the neighbors there came to us and said, ‘Hey I’m looking to sell my property or sell my house,’ and we had it appraised and we went ahead and bought it since it backed right up to the arboretum,” Wyatt said. “Since then, you know, the neighbors have come-a callin’.”

That first property acquired by JMU was 709 Locust Hill Drive, back in 2013. The university bought it for \$315,000.

“There’s high demand for that sort of thing in terms of new faculty and staff coming in, faculty or staff in transition, so we’ve got a long list of people who really would like that benefit,” Wyatt said.

The funding for these purchases comes from JMU’s auxiliary reserve account, which consists of funds held back on an annual basis for things like property acquisition and unexpected maintenance. The rent that faculty and staff pay back to the university makes it a breakeven proposition.

Kline, despite her neighbors’ recent departure, isn’t looking for change any time soon.

“I love my house and I love my yard,” Kline said. “It’s a beautiful neighborhood, and I would like to stay in my home ... that’s all I want.”

Contact Matt D’Angelo and Mike Dolzer at breezypress@gmail.com.