

## The Highland Square District and its History

Highland Square is one of Akron's oldest and most historically significant neighborhoods. The area features many notable landmarks and was home to several famous individuals. Local residents think of Highland Square as extending approximately one mile in each direction from the commercial center at Market Street and Highland Avenue. However, the Highland Square History Project recently completed by the Summit County Historical Society, defines it in conformance with the City of Akron's Redevelopment Plans as the much larger area bordered by West Market Street, Merriman Road, Memorial Parkway, Twin Oaks Road, Mayfield Avenue, South Rose Boulevard, West Exchange Street and Maple Street.

Northwest Akron's oldest feature is the Portage Path, which passes along the street bearing its name. Native Americans used this path for centuries to portage their canoes between the Cuyahoga and Tuscarawas Rivers. Portage Path was part of the effective western boundary of the United States from 1785 to 1805, and for decades "Unk," the statue of an Indian, has watched over this famous trail.

Highland Square developed first as a residential neighborhood for the city's industrial leaders. Seeking relief from the soot and noise of the rubber factories that drifted east from downtown, this affluent group migrated from the East Market Street-Fir Hill area to the higher elevations in the vicinity of West Market Street and Portage Path. These entrepreneurs built large, sturdy homes that were joined by numerous upscale apartment buildings during the city's boom years in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The 1950s and 1960s were years of decline in Highland Square, but by the mid-1970s a rejuvenation was taking place as district residents recognized the historic value of the neighborhood.

No one knows for sure how Highland Square originally got its name, but it most likely arose from the commercial district centered at West Market Street and Highland Avenue. Thanks to the presence of the Highland Theater, Mary Coyle's Ice Cream and a variety of long established bars and restaurants, Highland Square has been a destination for Akron residents and visitors since the 1930s. Some of the neighborhood's more famous early residents included publisher John S. Knight, presidential candidate Wendell Wilkie, Senator Charles Dick, industrialist Paul W. Litchfield and Alcoholics Anonymous founder Dr. Robert Smith. Today, thousands of people visit the area each year to see "Dr. Bob's" home, the Stan Hywet Hall and Gardens and other nearby attractions.

## The Highland Square Development Association

The Highland Square Development Association (HSDA) is a group of concerned citizens, primarily area residents, formed in 1996 in response to a proposal to place a suburban-style, set-back Taco Bell restaurant and drive-through on a parcel located at the northeast corner of West Market Street and Portage Path. With financial support from the City of Akron, the group conducted focus groups, surveys and open meetings that resulted in the development and presentation of an action plan in the spring of 1998 containing the following goals:

1. Protect and enhance the mix of buildings that characterize Highland Square.
2. Protect and enhance the physical characteristics that make up the fabric of the neighborhoods and the business areas of Highland Square.
3. Protect and enhance the pedestrian character of Highland Square.
4. Protect and enhance both the image of Highland Square as one of Akron's most desirable neighborhoods to live, work, and shop in – and continue to improve public safety.
5. Protect and enhance the diversity of the business community in Highland Square.

As a direct result of this survey, the City of Akron purchased the site and prevented the development of the Taco Bell. The site has been held since its acquisition in anticipation of the eventual development of a more contextually appropriate use.

The HSDA has been meeting steadily since 1998, and has accomplished a great deal. It became apparent, however, that additional guidance and resources were needed if the organization was to achieve its overriding goal of a comprehensive economic revitalization of the Highland Square business district.

## The Highland Square Business Association

The Highland Square Business Association (THSBA) was formed in the fall of 2000 at the suggestion of Akron Mayor Donald L. Plusquellic to build a consensus on the future direction of the Highland Square commercial district. THSBA's Code of Regulations states, "The purpose of the Association shall be to promote commerce in Highland Square, to secure an environment for the profitable benefit of business owners and property owners, and to enhance the quality of life of Highland Square".

# Project Background

In September 2001, THSBA asked First Avenues, LLC to submit a proposal to develop a comprehensive strategy for the revitalization of the Highland Square Business District. The firm was contracted to complete the plan in cooperation with the Urban Design Center of Northeast Ohio (UDC), which was given primary responsibility for the overall design concept for the district, and for the preparation of detailed design guidelines to preserve and enhance the character of the area.

As the objective of the plan was to unlock the district's full economic potential, the following goals were adopted:

- To revitalize Highland Square Business District's economic base
- To revitalize Highland Square Business District as a center of social activity
- To examine adjacent residential/commercial areas

The following methodologies and objectives were established for this project:

- Work in close cooperation with the Highland Square Business Association, constituents and pertinent civic organizations throughout the planning process.
- Utilize information from the City of Akron's recently completed *Imagining Akron: The Report of Imagine Akron:2025*.
- Provide information that details market trends, pertinent demographics of the Highland Square Business District and the surrounding area, traffic patterns and parking availability in the district.
- Identify the needs of existing and potential businesses located within the district.
- Provide realistic, market-driven revitalization strategies for enhancing economic development in the Highland Square Business District and establishing the district as a center for social activities.
- Include recommended management and implementation strategies.
- Establish a detailed action plan.
- Build a consensus of support among appropriate constituencies for the implementation of the proposed direction.

- Provide strategic and organizational assistance during the early stages of implementation of the proposed direction.

First Avenues used a wide variety of published data, field audits, and telephone and in-person interviews to gather and analyze the information found in this plan. These sources are attributed where appropriate throughout the report.

First Avenues wishes to give special thanks to the Highland Square Steering Committee members who worked closely and diligently with us throughout this project. In addition, First Avenues thanks the individuals who represented the various sectors of the local community and district and were interviewed for this report, as well as those who have contributed to its funding. See Appendix 5 for lists of the Steering Committee members, interviewees and contributors.

