



News: Off the Map

The village of North Bend fights to keep its independence

By Lew Moores

Phil Wienkamp recalls that as a teen in the 1930s he found himself in the woods that was part of the village of North Bend, hunting rabbits on a hillside that overlooked the sweep of the Ohio River flowing past this little town in western Hamilton County.

These days Wienkamp, born and raised in Price Hill, lives on the hill where he once hunted rabbits.

"I can look out over my porch here and see all the beautiful hills in Kentucky and the river, and it's such a scenic place," he says.

Wienkamp lives in Aston Oaks, an upscale housing development — many homes are in the \$200,000 to \$1 million range — and golf course that in the 1990s became the newest addition to a village steeped in history.

That could change within a month, when voters in this village of 603 go to the polls and decide whether the town's two centuries of existence as a village come to an end. On the Nov. 4 ballot is an issue that, if approved, will dissolve North Bend — located about 15 miles west of downtown Cincinnati along U.S. 50 — into surrounding Miami Township.

North Bend, the county's smallest village, is the home of two U.S. presidents. John Cleves Symmes, who founded North Bend in 1789, envisioned it as a thriving metropolis on the banks of the Ohio.

It never happened, of course. That happened instead upriver in Cincinnati.

The hills of North Bend kept it pinched to just a little over one square mile. These days it's a pocket of modest homes that line quiet streets lacing the foot of the hillside before winding uphill. There

Jymi Bolden

North Bend should maintain its identity as a village, according to Mayor Shirley Smith and Ron Nunnery, who chairs a campaign to defeat its proposed dissolution.

or modest homes and the quietness of the village. The Village Market closed eight years ago, and the village's population has changed little in more than 200 years.

Yet its history, size and pastoral ambience are among its charms, say those who live here. Aston Oaks breathed new life into a village that twice before in the 1990s considered dissolution — although it never went to ballot — because of dwindling finances.

Poor finances are not the case this time. The village is on good footing, with more than \$500,000 in its coffers. That confounds some who wonder why the issue of dissolution materialized this year.

"Nobody seems to know," says Alan Montague Sr., a former mayor who has spent most of his 82 years in the village. "There's a lot of speculation."

The developer wants dissolution

The speculation is that Aston Oaks developer John Niehaus, who doesn't live in North Bend, initiated the petition drive to place dissolution on the ballot.

Niehaus denies it. He says Aston Oaks residents who wanted to dissolve the village approached him. Ostensibly, those who are pushing this want to save money in taxes should the village become part of the township.

Some don't buy that. The savings would be minimal, they point out — \$51 a year for the owner of a \$100,000 house. Instead they believe Niehaus was unhappy with the slow progress he's made in developing Aston Oaks, which has 165 houses but is zoned for more than 700, and he decided that working with the township trustees and county commissioners would be more advantageous than working with the village council.

"He figured he can do much better with the township trustees," says one resident. "He has no influence in North Bend. So John Niehaus is the one who promoted the dissolution of the village."

The village has control of its zoning, including the plan for Aston Oaks, according to Mayor Shirley Smith. There have been disagreements over how to proceed with development, she says.

"It's a beautiful area up there," Smith says. "But he has to go through the steps and they would have to be approved by council."

It is, indeed, beautiful on the hill: a quiet, rolling landscape with generous vistas of the river and huge homes fronted by sprawling, emerald-green lawns, with wooded areas that have survived the ax. Landscaping is impeccable, and the golf course seems to blend into the development. Signs of further progress continue with homes under various phases of construction.

Aston Oaks has increased population in the village and added to the tax rolls. In 1990 the village's median family income was \$30,417; in 2000 it was almost \$61,000, according to the U.S. Census. The median house value in 1990 was \$57,200; in 2000 it was \$122,500.

"Our population is growing, says Ron Nunnery, chairman of the campaign to defeat the dissolution issue. "We're financially sound, so there's really no reason to dissolve."

At a village council meeting last week, Niehaus and an associate, Ron Sweeney, spoke before council, four of whose six members live in Aston Oaks.

"This is not a question of council versus John Niehaus," Niehaus said.

He told them that if the ballot initiative succeeds, he'll continue to follow the development plans for Aston Oaks and will never build apartments there. The history of the village won't be lost if it merges with the township, Niehaus said.

"History is history, and it's not lost as long as there are records and monuments and people around," he said. "This is not a battle between the village and the developer."

Sweeney, who lives in the adjoining village of Addyston, told council that Niehaus has invested in the community, enhanced the village and preserved as best he could the natural landscape.

"So why are you so interested in going to Miami Township?" asked Councilwoman Sheryl Ross, an Aston Oaks resident.

Sweeney said residents approached Niehaus about dissolving and the residents of North Bend should be allowed to decide their political future.

Councilman Jim Rolfes, another Aston Oaks resident, sharply asked Sweeney, "Do you feel the citizens of North Bend can't govern themselves? Yes or no."

"I don't know," said Sweeney.

"Why did you go out and solicit signatures?" Rolfes asked. "And you're not even a resident of our community." 

More pointed questions followed from councilmen Alan Montague II and Doug Seifert.

"(Niehaus and Sweeney) have said they just want the people to decide," Rolfes said. "Well, we don't want outsiders telling us what kind of government to have."

After the meeting, Niehaus stood outside the municipal building on Taylor Street. He's a wiry man who wore just a polo shirt in the evening chill. He said he had the vision to see what could happen in North Bend, as well as a development in Miami Township. He didn't initiate the petition drive, he said again. But, he said, "somebody has to run with the ball and find out what to do."

There are two reasons North Bend has survived, he said. One is people who have died and left money to the village. The second reason is Aston Oaks.

"Do I want people to vote yes (for dissolution)?" Niehaus asked. "I think it should be voted yes."

Why?

"Because of 14 years of experiences, but I'll let it go at that," he said. "In the township I've developed 425 units in three years and all but four sold. In the village, it's taken 10 years and I've only done 165, with another 20 about to sell. So I decided to pick up the ball and run with it. If they're so sure (about saving the village), why are they so scared?"

A Jeffersonian remnant

What scares some residents isn't so much a loss of history, although that counts for something. After all, the tomb of William Henry Harrison, ninth president of the United States, with its tall stone obelisk overlooking the Ohio River, wouldn't disappear. Nor would the Congress Green Cemetery, where John Cleves Symmes and other pioneers are buried. Dissolution wouldn't erase the memory of the 1833 birthplace of Harrison's grandson, Benjamin Harrison, the 23rd U.S. president.

"I think people would hate to lose the name," says Montague Sr. "That's what I hear from people. They just don't want that part of history to disappear."

But more to the point, those who want to save the village do so out of a wish to stay close to those they elect, preserving a sense of political intimacy in governmental affairs. At council meetings, for instance, it's not unusual for spectators to spontaneously ask questions.

Some residents have come to believe this is where democracy most fundamentally lives and endures, a decidedly Jeffersonian idea. Dissolution would mean a diminution of political voice in the life of a community.

"It is a very small community and I feel that my vote really counts," Wienkamp says. "I feel like I have almost personal control here. Why would I want to give that up?"

The mayor shares that view.

"It would mean there would be no government here," Smith says. "The biggest thing would be our control of our little town. When people have a problem, they're used to coming right to council. You try to work with people. As mayor, I try to listen to every person. They call and I make sure I get back with them."

Nunnery, who has lived in the village since 1991, believes the importance of a government close to the people is paramount.

"We want to be able to keep self-governing here and not become part of a larger township," he says. "That's where the voice of this area becomes diluted by the overall population. We feel being able to walk down the street and talking to your local council member is a great thing, and we want to keep that."

One of the things he wants to accomplish is to blur the line between "old" North Bend versus "new."

"One of the things we're trying to fight against is the designation of the old village versus the new village," Nunnery says. "We're all one village. It's just that one part has been around longer than the other. We've discussed that line between old and new and we want to erase that line. We're looking at this as an opportunity to do that." ©