

# WHITHER MCKOWNVILLE?

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## Hamlet lives with 'boom or doom' dilemma

By Judy Shepard

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**MCKOWNVILLE** — Will success spoil McKownville?

There's no doubt that success has arrived in McKownville, a mere scrap of land along Western Avenue in the town of Guilderland. Its boundaries are roughly the Northway, the Thruway, the Albany city line and the State University of Albany.

McKownville's proximity to Albany, Western Avenue, the Northway and the Thruway makes it prime for development. Commercial ventures are clustered along Western Avenue near the end of the Northway and Fuller Road, and there is intense pressure for more development.

But that same proximity also makes McKownville an attractive place to live, for university professors who like to walk to work, and those who moved to what was then a small rural community, long before the university or Stuyvesant Plaza or the Northway arrived.

So the battle rages over McKownville's future — between those who want to live there and those who want to build.

The big battle is over — the giant Crossgates shopping mall, so fiercely opposed by many McKownville residents, finally won approval for construction in the Pine Bush near the Northway and Western Avenue. But residents remain opposed to what they see as "creeping commercialism."

The battles are nothing new — when the Stuyvesant Plaza shopping and office center was proposed in 1955, the McKownville Improvement Association opposed it, for many of the same reasons the association fought Crossgates.

The problem with McKownville is that it owes its existence to the very thing that is causing its growing pains — Western Avenue.

It was a cagey developer almost 200 years ago who first built here on the knowledge that the Great Western Turnpike — the dirt track that became Western Avenue — was going to be built. Eventually, the turnpike would link Albany to Buffalo.

Fred Abele, McKownville's unofficial

historian, said the hamlet is named for the McKowns, a Scottish family who arrived in the area in the late 1700's.

The first member of the clan was John McKown, who leased the Five Mile House, a tavern near what is now Indian Quad on the university campus.

His son, William, built a tavern in 1793 at a site near the present Burger King. "Apparently he had some knowledge of the plans for the Great Western Turnpike," Abele said.

The family flourished until the middle of this century, when the last direct descendants of John McKown died, leaving no children.

The tavern, a large wooden building

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# Hamlet's dilemma: Boom or doom?

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with a number of outbuildings and pens for housing cattle being driven along the turnpike, burned in the 1920s. One house, built by a great-great grandson of John McKown, remains at the corner of Western Avenue and McKown Road.

Around the tavern grew a cluster of houses; later there was a school and other businesses, but for many years McKownville stayed a rural farming community.

In those days, the city of Albany was a few miles away through the woods. "At one time, McKownville was isolated from the city; the city grew out to it," Abele said.

Roger Keenholts, Guilderland town historian, said much of the development that brought the city to McKownville's doors took place in this century.

Gradually, as the city approached, the area changed from rural to suburban.

"When we came here, it had already changed from farming to suburban," Abele said. "Then, during the 1960s, it became a university town, and then the shopping center added a new dimension."

Stuyvesant Plaza and the university opened in 1965.

The university brought people like Lindsay Childs and Donald Reeb, professors who became active in the

improvement association and in the battle to stop the Crossgates Mall.

The improvement association began in 1924, Abele said. "One of the things that sparked it was, they wanted to build sidewalks and a water district."

Today, the association might more aptly be called the McKownville Protection Association, as its efforts have largely been aimed at monitoring, controlling, or stopping commercial development.

Childs, president of the improvement association this year, came to McKownville ten years ago. "I was particularly attracted by the fact that it's close to the university and I could walk to work," he said.

Since he moved here, he has seen the south side of Western Avenue boom — the Ramada Inn, Taco Pronto, Denny's, Burger King, Coco's, banks, dentist offices, and more.

"That's a lot of development in a one-mile strip," Childs said. "It's a more intense commercial development now; it was sort of sleepy when I came here."

Childs sees McKownville as unique in its proximity and accessibility to Albany, while it offers the advantages of the suburban Guilderland school system and a residential setting.

"If it's going to remain a reasonable residential area, it's going to have to be treated with some care," he said. "Residents have to have confidence that the neighborhood is going to remain residential. I hope the government realizes that it is fragile over here."

Kevin Moss, completing his first term as Guilderland supervisor this year, says the government is indeed sensitive.

"We have to be acutely aware of the fact that if there is too much more commercial development, there won't be a McKownville," Moss said.

Moss would like to see the north side of Western Avenue remain residential, confining any commercial growth to the south side.

In addition, he said, "I do not buy the argument that just because Western Avenue is heavily travelled, it has to be commercial."

Moss said McKownville's chances of survival as a residential neighborhood are "better than ever."

He cited the town board's decision to rezone 50 Fuller Road residential, putting an end to efforts to open an



Times Union photo by Bob Richey

## ONE ROAD, TWO WORLDS — Western Avenue in McKownville: Business on south side, homes on north.

insurance business in a home there. The move was opposed by the improvement association as another example of commercial development invading the remaining residential parts of the hamlet.

In addition, McKownville, which has been without a park since McKown's Grove was sold to the 21st Point Club, is due to get a new park on seven acres near Schoolhouse Road.

Childs said he feels the efforts of the improvement association to control commercial development in the hamlet have met with a better reception in town hall since Moss took office.

"I'm fairly optimistic at this stage," he said.

During the Crossgates fight, McKownville residents considered incorporating the hamlet as a village in order to gain control over its own zoning and land use. There was some feeling among McKownville residents that their voice was not heard at town hall.

"The concept for a village arose out of frustration, because of an inability to control its own development," Reeb said.

The idea never got off the ground, mostly because residents feared the financial and governmental responsibilities would be too great for such a small population — fewer than 3,000 people.

Childs said, "As long as the town government is sensitive to the problems of commercialization in McKownville, I think the village question will be forgotten."

Moss said McKownville residents should "be secure in the fact that we are very much concerned with their interests."

However, there are some Guilderland residents who see things in a different light.

Michael Shanley, a local attorney who represented Crossgates during its lengthy battle for permission to build, said, "I think the people of McKownville are by and large well-intentioned, but McKownville sits at the crossroads of two major roadways. Consequently, there is pressure to develop."

And that's not all bad, Shanley argued. "Contrary to the impression you might get from others, I think it (commercial development) is positive and in almost every case has served to improve both McKownville and Guilderland."

Shanley added that commercial development along Western Avenue is nothing new, and that what has come recently "is more attractive and of better service to the community than what was there before."

John Smircich, a town board member has been a McKownville resident since 1972. He "McKownville can't remain a small hamlet, isolated from the area around it. Unfortunately, it is right by the Thruway and the Northway. It's just too convenient.

"There's no question there has to be commercial development," Smircich continued. "But if you tip the scales too far, people are going to lose their desire to stay here."

Smircich was one of those who pushed unsuccessfully for a residential business zone for Western Avenue, to restrict commercial enterprises there to professional offices and service businesses which are considered more compatible with a residential neighborhood.

"You can have good commercial use on Western," he said of the plan, which was defeated by the town board last spring. "It's a tough thing," said Smircich, who is not seeking re-election this fall. "There's a lot of pressure on McKownville now."

Town government should establish a firm policy of keeping the north side of Western Avenue residential and reducing the intensity of commercial development on the south side, Smircich said.

"Then, McKownville will be able to keep its head above water."