

GARY EICHTEN: It is not often on this program that we talk about a street, and in fact, that's not all we're going to be talking about this morning. But that is part of what we're going to be getting into the next few minutes. It's a Grand Old Day as being held on Sunday from 11 o'clock in the morning till 5:00 PM in the afternoon.

And what is a Grand Old Day? Well, it's a whole series of special activities that are going to be held on Grand Avenue in Saint Paul. The purpose of all the activities, well, there's several purposes, but I guess the main one is to raise money for St. Paul Children's Hospital Free Bed and Clinic Fund. They're going to have polka bands on the streets, beer gardens, popcorn stands, all kinds of shops and stores will be open on Grand Avenue. Ronald McDonald will even be on hand. And all of this part of Grand Old Day, as we said, 11:00 to 5:00 Sunday a afternoon.

And with us to talk a little bit about what all of this means, why they're doing this, is architect Jim Wangler, who operates on Grand Avenue, spent quite a bit of time working with the various community groups, particularly on programs designed to renovate and restore and preserve neighborhoods around the Central City. And first of all, Jim, let me say, thank you for coming in this morning. And I guess a place to start would be to ask you why, given all the various choices of ways to raise money for a hospital, why it was chosen-- why it was decided to go this route, why make such a big thing about a street?

JIM WANGLER: Well, Grand Avenue represents today what a lot of people-- what can be considered a solution to the energy problem. Grand Avenue is an existing facility. It's at the center of a residential area. And it kind of is a new focus. Or we can look back to the refocusing or a renaissance, almost, or metamorphosis of the city as a solution to some of our energy problems and urban problems.

I think we've been neglecting the city lately in the last 10 years. We've been looking to the suburbs for solutions to problems. In other words, we're avoiding the problem, really. But now we're relooking or rediscovering the city and the city street and the commercial street as a shopping center in the middle of a community, an existing community. And I think Grand Avenue really does all of this. You can find almost anything you want on Grand Avenue. I had my office there, and I've been discovering it myself. And I really have grown to love it. And with restaurants and bars and shops, flower shops, drug stores, hardware stores. You name it, and it exists on Grand Avenue.

GARY EICHTEN: Being a relative newcomer to Saint Paul, and I guess specifically to the Grand Avenue area, it struck me when I first arrived or got a feel for the area that it really is a-- the entire area is a town within a town. Would that be a fair assessment of what's happening on perhaps a larger scale in the Twin City area of various towns within towns cropping up?

JIM WANGLER: I believe you can say that with some accuracy. It really is. People, they still come downtown, and Minneapolis and downtown Saint Paul for their many goods and services. But you can still walk to a grocery store. You can get on a bus and do many of your normal daily chores within the community or within a walking pedestrian community, which is refreshing, bicycling to go shopping.

I find a lot of people can get by without two cars. A lot of families can exist with one car. Whereas in the suburbs, it's almost an impossibility if the husband has to drive to work. So there are many advantages to-- the houses are great, some great fine neighborhoods that surround the Grand Avenue the full length. You find as the city grew from downtown out toward the river, out toward Saint Thomas, we find the older neighborhoods closer to town. And then as you go out, you see the-- we see history the way it developed.

And the city, back in 1890, had roughly over 100,000 people, which is about one third of what it has today. So there was a large population even back in 1890. And so as you go out from Dale out to Cleveland, you do see change in neighborhoods. But the neighborhoods are really quite fine. They're still viable and still-- they're still supporting their local businesses.

GARY EICHTEN: Not only along Grand Avenue, but throughout the-- certainly the Twin City area, and I suspect this may be happening in other large cities as well. There is a real sense of neighborhoods, I think, coming back. Certainly a lot of neighborhood community organizations being formed these days for one purpose or another. Why do you suppose that occurrence is taking place now as opposed to, let's say, 15 years ago? What happened that--

JIM WANGLER: Well, I guess when you feel threatened, let's say, in your own home, you probably will do something, more than likely, because that's human nature. If nothing is threatening you, you tend to just go on as if-- you just go on and you don't-- there's no visible sign of life. But that doesn't necessarily mean things are dead.

And so it happened generally in the neighborhoods-- in the Summit Hill neighborhood and the Ramsey Hill neighborhood. They felt threatened from, let's say-- well, I guess the Summit Hill Association was founded because of a development that the residents felt was a threat to their residential way of life. But the Summit Hill Association grew to take on other kinds of chores, and it really became a sounding board for the community. I'm more familiar with Summit Hill than Ramsey Hill and some of the others, and so I can maybe speak about Summit Hill.

But when the freeway-- it's controversial issue, but when the 35E was to-- when people finally realized what the implication of 35E was on the neighborhood, they responded with an organization called RIP-35E which meant residents in protest. Well, I think we've seen this all along where a community will, when threatened with a-- when the neighborhood is threatened and their way of life is threatened, they seem-- they'll respond. And I think a lot of the community action that we see now is as a result of this, and it's really healthy. It shows that we're alive and we're willing to fight, and it's really fun getting the people together. I mean, there are a lot of great people, and you get to know them quite well in these kinds of efforts.

GARY EICHTEN: I can see a couple of problems, or potential problems, with the development of neighborhoods and that sort of thing, or the resurgence of a neighborhood feeling. And maybe we can talk about those for just a minute. Number one, what about the problem of fragmentation? Is there such a-- what happens to a person who becomes more identified with his local community, his local neighborhood? And doesn't he tend to lose sight of the larger concerns that a city or indeed a metropolitan area has to concern itself with? Isn't there a danger of that happening?

JIM WANGLER: Well, I don't think so, because I think first, you have to look at your own family, and then you're Black. And I think what we're looking for are healthy communities. And I think if you're not willing to fight for your block or your little area, no one else is. And I think that-- but still recognizing that you fit within the fabric of a total community.

I respect the citizen efforts in this way. I think there is a danger of some fragmentation and disruption, but yet, it's the people that are talking. And I think it has to be recognized. A lot of times, maybe they're wrong, and a development or whatever will happen or go around or over the citizens, but at least the citizens have voiced their concern, and it's going to be taken into consideration in some way.

So I really do think it's healthy, and we're seeing more involvement by more citizens. And, I guess, one thing I'd like to mention is that back when we were talking about the whole metropolitan area, 10, 20 years ago, we thought we were going to grow at a much more-- much more quickly. We were expecting four million people by the year 2000, because of the population growth at the time. But that has been dropped off so quickly, the curve has flattened out that we won't reach this kind of a population.

So the expansion of the metropolitan area has to respond to this. In other words, we can't just keep thinking that we can keep on growing and developing forever and keep spreading our city out. We just won't have the population to support this kind of development. And so the Center City, really, still has to be-- in other words, I guess if we spread out so far, the spread city concept would be parasitic on the Center City. In other words, at the expense of the Center City, you're developing further and further out. And so this is what's happened across the country. We've seen just an exodus from the city, and at least the money has exited. And we've seen a lot of decay and very little capital investment in the city.

GARY EICHTEN: Do you have a feeling that at the bottom of many of the neighborhood groups that have been formed is a subtle kind of racism? Perhaps racism isn't quite the right word. A real effort to keep people of lower income groups out of neighborhoods, and I'm thinking particularly now of Blacks?

JIM WANGLER: Well, I guess-- one reason that I think Grand Avenue has become-- is successful, it's totally integrated in terms of both economic backgrounds, and racially, and young and old, and completely economically. I mean, we see millionaires shopping alongside people in very low-income brackets, as well as different races. And everybody's mixing, and it's working well. I think it is.

And it's the fact that Grand Avenue is still, people are there, and they're using it. And they're shopping, and it's not going to go away. And there's still investment coming into the area. And people are opening shops. They're looking to the future with some degree of optimism. And I'm excited about it. I think it can be an example of what can be done in the city.

GARY EICHTEN: So rather than excluding people, you feel like, at least in the Grand Avenue area, you've included as many--

JIM WANGLER: Definitely.

GARY EICHTEN: --people as care to come in?

JIM WANGLER: Definitely.

GARY EICHTEN: Interesting idea. And you'll be able to see all those different kinds of people and all the different kinds of things that go on around and about Grand Avenue on It's a Grand Old Day this Sunday. And they are going to be out in the streets, they being all kinds of things-- hot dog stands, popcorn stands, polka bands, beer gardens, and the rest. And people, lots of people will all be out in the street 11 o'clock in the morning until 5 o'clock in the afternoon this Sunday in Saint Paul. It should be an interesting experience. Jim Wangler, thank you very much for coming in this morning.

JIM WANGLER: Thank you very much, Gary.