

Interview with Councilman Joseph Cimperman
Interviewed by Patricia Haller
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Cleveland City Hall

Categories:

Housing, Historic Renovation, Freeway Destruction, Community Development,
Migration

Patricia Haller: Good Morning, It is Monday morning September 29, 2003. My name is Patricia Ann Haller of Cleveland State University. This morning I am interviewing Ward 13 Councilman, Joseph Cimperman, for the Tremont Oral History Project at Cleveland City Hall. This history project represents a collaboration between the History Department at Cleveland State University, Tremont West Development Corporation, and Ohio Canal Corridor. The goal of this project is to chronicle the memories of past and current residents of Cleveland's historic urban Tremont neighborhood.

Haller:

Mr. Cimperman, please state your name and title.

Cimperman:

Joseph Cimperman, Cleveland City Council Ward 13.

Haller: Can you describe your childhood memories, traditions?

Cimperman:

I was born and raised in the St. Clair-Superior Neighborhood, but had friends in the Tremont community, and we traveled there often. It's a wonderful community that is filled with many people from different ethnic backgrounds, and my ethnic background is Slovenian-American. However, our friends who were Ukrainian and Greek, who lived in the Tremont neighborhood, often shared their family traditions with us. And Tremont is a very rich community that still maintains many of its ethnic memories.

Haller:

Where did you go to high school and college?

Cimperman:

St. Ignatius High School and John Carroll University

Haller:

What did you major in, and what organizations were you involved in?

Cimperman:

I majored in English, with a minor in education, and I was involved in student government and some of the different community service projects at John Carroll.

Haller:

How, and when did you get involved in the Tremont community?

Cimperman:

I first got involved in the Tremont community by playing tennis in Clark Field when I was a little kid. There was an organization called the National Junior Tennis League, and I would often go to Tremont to compete there. I moved to Tremont back in 1996, and I was very involved then in an organization called 'Citizens to Save Metro Hospital', and I was also involved in the Tremont Neighborhood Opportunity Center. This was while I was working as an outreach worker at the West Side Catholic Center. My first impressions of Tremont were that it was a close knit community, that people there really looked out for each other, and that many people in the neighborhood saw themselves as being residents of a small town, instead of part of a larger city.

Haller:

What made you decide to run for councilman? When were you elected?

Cimperman:

I ran for councilman because I felt that the neighborhood I grew up in, the St. Clair-Superior neighborhood, as well as Tremont, and part of the Ohio City near west neighborhood as well as downtown were in need of some focused leadership. I decided to run back in 1997 to my first term of Cleveland City Council.

Haller:

What committees are you participating in?

Cimperman:

I'm the Chairman of the City Planning Committee,
I'm the Vice Chairman of the Community and Economic Development Committee,
I'm on the Public Service Committee, The Public Parks Committee, and I also served on the Public Safety Committee.

Haller:

What makes Tremont so unique in the role of Cleveland History?

Cimperman:

Tremont has always been a place where, -- it's interesting -- Its proximity to the steel mills always insured that people who would be in Tremont, would not only have a decent job, but would be living in a community where there were people living from different

parts of the world living there. It has always been an immigrant neighborhood and it's always been a place that's been welcoming of people who have different ideas, different political philosophies, different religions, and what makes Tremont so unique, is that it is now an example of one of Cleveland's finest neighborhoods. And so I think the fact that its embrace of diversity, back in the time that Tremont was founded, is paying dividends in the current time of today.

Haller:

Historically, what major changes have occurred in Tremont over the years?

Cimperman:

Tremont used to be the home for many workers for the different steel mills and different factories. Over the years it fell into terrible, terrible decay where arsons were part of every single night's experiences. People were struggling to get by. Crime and Safety – Crime was a terrible threat to the safety in the neighborhood. So, the changes that have occurred that – in the late 70's and early 80's people have started to realize that Tremont – its housing stock was still relatively decent. It was a jewel, and people started to refurbish it. And as a result we've now seen some of the higher increase in property values occur in Tremont over the past few years. It's primarily because people in the neighborhood have invested a lot and decided, to stay and live there. It's a wonderful example of Cleveland's comeback.

Haller:

Can you describe the different sections of Tremont such as North, South, East and West?

Cimperman:

There is really three sections of Tremont, North Tremont, what's known as Middle Tremont, and then South Tremont.

North Tremont is the area north of 490 which is where many of the new homes have been built. It's a beautiful example of the new construction blend with the historic renovation.

Middle Tremont is the area around Mentor-Clark-Castle, relatively small neighborhood, buttressed between Clark Avenue and 490 -- still many large two family homes, very stable. Many people live there purchase their homes and live there.

And South Tremont which is south of Clark, which is probably the most dense part of Tremont which has probably some of the most housing left of worker's housing that people used to live in when they used to work the steel mills. So, South Tremont south of Clark is actually, probably closer to how Tremont was when it was first founded with the different immigrants, and different people of different economic backgrounds than much of the other neighborhood is of today.

Haller:

What are some of the key issues that are of major concern to the Tremont residents of today?

Cimperman:

Well, crime is always an issue, but that is something that's due. . . block clubs and the close relationship that we have with the police, we are able to work out. Pollution has always been an issue since the closure of the LTV plant, it has not been as bad as it was. Housing is an issue in only in that the housing prices are going up and up, and while that's attracting many people to the neighborhood, and that's a great thing. There's still a need to remember that there is still people in the neighborhood who are in the middle economic brackets and the lower economic brackets and we need to remember to keep an eye out for them. Some of the major issues that are facing Tremont residents right now are -- we are trying to keep our school open, Tremont School. As a result of the many of the new people who moved into the neighborhood who don't have kids. The school district is saying we don't have the numbers. I disagree with that, I think we do. I think it's an artificial control that the school districts putting on us. And another concern is the whole inner belt study with the Ohio Department of Transportation. They are going to be redoing 71 and I-90. As a result of that, we are going to have a new innerbelt and so people are very concerned about that. And another issue that people are always worried about is: how do we maintain the momentum that Tremont has now because so many people are moving in and living there?

Haller:

What role do the block clubs and the Tremont West Corporation play in Tremont?

Cimperman:

The block clubs are important because they not only make sure that people feel connected to government, and that they are able to get something done, but they are also extremely effective in terms of rallying public support for different causes. Tremont West Corporation is extremely important because they're basically the local non profit whose sole job is to advocate for the quality of life in Tremont, whether it be through running the arts and cultural festival, or the Taste of Tremont, or it's to run the paint programs for the elderly people so they can get their house painted for free, or whether it's the administering of the block clubs or the invitation of new developers to come in to the neighborhood to develop more property.

Haller:

How has Cleveland State Been involved in the Tremont Community?

Cimperman:

Cleveland State's been involved in that they lent us different students who were interning or working in the different departments to help us with different projects that were going on. I know one of the things that we worked with Cleveland State on were some of the demographics for the amount of school children that we had in the neighborhood, which helped us to keep the school opened two years ago when there was a move to close it. So Cleveland State has been involved basically whenever we asked them to come in and for that we are very grateful.

Haller:

How has Cleveland urban policy affected the Tremont area?

Cimperman:

It's interesting. It's almost a tidal affect. The freeways that were built to . . .facilitate urban sprawl were basically freeways that had a real. . . I would say detrimental effect. . . that they helped to pull people out of the neighborhoods, and they did so in a way that tore out people's homes in Tremont and made it easier for people to leave. That being said, the freeway system has created an island affect down in Tremont which has certainly helped the real estate values to increase and the ease of access has also made it very enjoyable for people to want to move back in to the neighborhood. So, in one way the urban policy destroyed Tremont, in another way it really helped to restore it.

Haller:

From what sources does Tremont receive funding for community improvement?

Cimperman:

From the City of Cleveland, from the federal government, from the Community Development Block Grant, and from the Mayor's Development Neighborhood Development Account

Haller:

I would like to ask some questions about housing. What programs exist for buying a home for the first time in Tremont? Where can people go?

Cimperman:

People can go to Tremont West administrators, called the Cash Program, which helps people who are first time home buyers in the City of Cleveland. You can get really good interest rates. They work in conjunction with different banks like Third Federal that has programs specific to neighborhoods like Tremont in order to help people to purchase homes for the first time.

Haller:

Can you describe the impact of the Phoenix Project, the Cleveland Housing Network, and the Habitat for Humanity on the Tremont community?

Cimperman:

The Phoenix Project was a project that was developed about five years ago when the land bank lots were being devoured by people who were attempting to build more and more upscale housing, which is a wonderful thing to build upscale housing. However, we were starting to lose the middle market, the middle income folks, people in the lower income brackets. And so as a result, the Phoenix Project basically put a hold on the land bank lots so that we were able to build homes that were moderately priced, and we could facilitate the purchase of these homes by people who would not otherwise be able to afford them.

Cleveland Housing Network was a partner in that. Habitat for Humanity built a house on West 7th Street, and I think that it provided a real model in the neighborhood to understand that Tremont could continue to be an economically balanced neighborhood.

Haller:

Does Habitat for Humanity plan to build any more homes in Tremont?

Cimperman:

To my knowledge, no, but the invitation is there.

Haller:

Are there any CMHA or HUD housing units in Tremont, and can you describe them?

Cimperman:

There are many CMHA housing units in Tremont. There is also many HUD Section 8 housing units in Tremont. The CMHA runs the Manhattan Tower on West 14th Street, and they run the Valleyview Estates on West 7th Street. Valleyview Estates are probably the worst housing projects in the entire city of Cleveland in that their maintenance schedule is horrible. The people are forced to live in this housing that just was never maintained since the 40's, and it's something that we're working on now to try to restore and fix up. The Manhattan Tower is a beautiful example of CMHA's good work on West 14th Street. But unfortunately there are not enough units in there to house everybody who needs housing. What you have now is many landlords who are applying for Section 8 certificates which basically allow people who are in the lower income bracket to be able to live in the community by subsidizing their rent.

Haller:

Can you describe what Section 8 is?

Cimperman:

Section 8 is a program by which landlords receive a certain amount above. . . they receive an amount of money regardless of what the tenant can pay. In other words, if a housing unit were to be rented out at \$600 dollars, and the tenant could only afford \$200, the Section 8 certificate would help to make up the gap.

Haller:

How many senior housing units are in Tremont? and, What services does the Tremont Community offer to its senior citizens?

Cimperman:

We don't have many designated senior housing units in Tremont. We used to have a health care facility for senior citizens. It was a place on the corner of West 14th and

Startkweather, I'm sorry, and Kenilworth. It was called the Pelton Place, but that has recently closed. However, we do have many, many seniors. What services we offer to them are through an organization called the Tremont Residents Services Corporation that basically has a non profit status. They put on two fund raisers every years to raise money in order to facilitate two large community festivals for about 500 senior citizens in an around the Tremont area every year. Providing things like flu shots, following up with them if they need to be hooked up with Meals on Wheels, basically providing up with them with comfort and company, and it's a wonderful, wonderful program. It's basically run by Tremont residents on a volunteer basis for Tremont senior citizens.

Haller:

What type of housing do you have for handicapped or disabled?

Cimperman:

Nothing specific designated, however, there are many units in the neighborhood that are handicapped accessible.

Haller:

How is housing discrimination handled? Have there been any complaints?

Cimperman:

I haven't fielded any complaints in my office. However, if there are any complaints, we have an office set up here at the City of Cleveland. The Office of Fair Housing, its sole job is to investigate acts of housing discrimination. But, you should know that Tremont is a neighborhood that pretty much is welcoming everybody. We have everybody in there right now. And housing discrimination in Tremont isn't something that. . . it's a rarity.

Haller:

What programs exist for home restoration, and historic preservation in Tremont?

Cimperman:

We have a lot of programs through the auspices of the Cleveland Restoration Society, that runs a phenomenal program where they can loan you money on a historic home where you basically can get loans for up to 1 ½ percent which is just phenomenal. It is an effort to try to have more people to fix up their homes. There are programs that the Cleveland Restoration Society in terms of helping with the technical side of it, and that's all run through Tremont West.

Haller:

Does the average home owner approach any of these organizations, or do they contact you first?

Cimperman:

The average home owner usually approaches Tremont West first, but if they approach me, I refer them to the Cleveland Restoration Society, and it's just a measure of, just a means of trying to connect them to the right people so they can get the money that they need.

Haller:

What building code standards exist for Tremont Residents, who enforces them, and inspects the residents' homes?

Cimperman:

The building code is the code established by the City of Cleveland. It is enforced by the building and housing inspectors, and it is something that is enforced by the inspectors when they visit. Many of the people in the neighborhood are conscious of the quality of their homes, and they really want to keep them up and this crosses all economic lines. Building and housing is seen as an effort to try to keep the neighborhood successful and to keep the neighborhood safe. I have a person who works specifically for me, her name is Katie Huff. She is my code enforcement person. She links up with all the block clubs and the local development groups and the inspectors. And we are daily going out making sure people have what they need to fix up their homes. And when we have investor landlords, who are truly owners of slum property we enforce the full effect of the law on them to make sure that they fix up their properties.

Haller:

That sounds wonderful. Has there been a demand for new or older style Victorian homes in Tremont?

Cimperman:

There has. . . but, the beauty of it, or the problem of it, however, you look at it. . . is that many of the older Victorian style homes have been restored, and people want live in there for the duration of their lives. So, it's not like we have an endless supply of them. However, there are still homes to be fixed up. It's just is not as plentiful as it used to be because people really bought them and really invested in their money in them. There is not as many vacant homes as there used to be.

Haller:

If someone wanted to build a new style Victorian home, could they do it?

Cimperman:

Sure they could. We still have lots that are owned by developers. They're a few land back lots that are left, very few, but we still have those and people can still work through that to build their homes.

Haller:

Would they have to go through a particular architect person?

Cimperman:

No, No. I mean they may have to go through a design review, depending where the home was being built. They may have to go through the Planning Commission and or the Landmark Commission.

Haller:

Can you describe the Lincoln Park Bathhouse, Tremont Ridge and some of the other new converted condos and new townhouses in Tremont?

Cimperman:

Lincoln Park Bathhouse was a project that was undertaken by Zaremba Developers to basically to take an old city owned bathhouse and converted into beautiful condos. It's a phenomenal example of historic renovation, restoration and renovation as well as turning some of the land in the back to some of the more funky housing that we have in the neighborhood. It's very New Age, it's very modern and it's beautiful. It's a nice blend of the old and the new. The Tremont Ridge is probably the greatest example of the comeback of Tremont with over 100 new units being built by Sutton Developers right along the ridge to view the downtown skyline. That more than anything else, has really resulted in the neighborhood making a comeback. Because you figure that in those 100 new units, you figure that you probably got 150 people living, and it's a phenomenal, phenomenal, investment in the neighborhood where vacant lands, and abandoned vehicles and burned out houses used to dot the skyline. Now it's just these beautiful homes that people live in, and the people who live there are very much contributors to the life of Tremont.

Haller:

The people who have lived in these. . . Lincoln Park Bathhouse and the Tremont Ridge, what income bracket would you say they are in?

Cimperman:

They probably would be in middle upper income. There definitely is . . . they work for a living. They are people who are lawyers. They are people who are doctors. They are people who are basically able to afford a house that could cost them anywhere from \$190,000 to \$280,000. And some of the houses are actually going for more than that. One of the houses sold for \$450,000. So it's really people who are moving in from the suburbs, people who are coming back from the communities that the freeways helped export them out to. And again, Tremont is living up to its reputation as being an immigrant community. Except now instead of the immigrants coming from Ukraine, Greece and Slovakia, they're coming from Strongsville, Solon and Willoughby Hills. We welcome them with the same open arms.

Haller:

Do these new residents live and work in downtown Cleveland?

Cimperman:

Many of them do. Some of them live and work in their own homes. Others interestingly enough, work in the suburbs, but live in the city. They kind of create the opposite of the usual commute. So they never have traffic going out, and they never have traffic going in.

Haller:

Does the Tremont community offer tax abatements for home owners?

Cimperman:

The Tremont like every other residential community in the city of Cleveland offers tax abatements for new home owners for new construction. It's the policy that was established under the previous mayoral administration, and one that this administration supports as well. So, if you build a new home in Tremont, you well get tax abatement for it.

Haller:

I would like to ask questions about art. How has art revitalized the community?

Cimperman:

The gallery owners and the artists in Tremont were really some of the pioneers of moving back into the neighborhood in the late 70's and the early 80's prior to Tremont being the hot place to dine or to live. The artists were living there, and they really provided the faith in the neighborhood that people didn't have, in terms in seeing that the neighborhood could make a turn around. So many, many people owe the artists of Tremont a great debt of gratitude because they were the ones who helped people think that was actually a good place for them to move into the first place. And art continues to revitalize the community in that we have festivals, art galleries, the Art Walk every month. It's just a phenomenal example of how art in the city can really work together, and the artists continue to be a major player in Tremont.

Haller:

What specific programs and galleries exist in Tremont to attract visitors?

Cimperman:

The Art Walk is a huge one. It happens every second Friday of the month where all the galleries open their doors. People walk through the galleries purchase the art from the local artists, enjoy a fine meal at one of the restaurants, enjoy some of the beautiful architecture of Tremont. We also have the now annual Ohio Ballet that performs in Lincoln Park This past year we had 3,000 people attend over two nights. We've had the

Fifth Annual Arts and Cultural festival in Lincoln Park. We've had over 10,000 people there this year, sampling some of the fine ethnic foods, buying some of the beautiful art, enjoying some of the outdoor performances. I've also founded a program through Park Works, through the work of Nora Romanoff who is a Cleveland State graduate to basically program Lincoln Park, so that we have art and different cultural programming going in there, almost four months of the year. It's a phenomenal, phenomenal park that really provides the artistic background for what people want to do in terms of expressing themselves in the neighborhood.

Haller:

Where are these galleries centered in Tremont? Or are they just all over?

Cimperman:

They're all over the place. They go from West 7th Street, from Fairfield Avenue all the way to Holmden. They're throughout the whole Tremont community.

Haller:

How did the innerbelt change the Tremont Community? Were there any historic sites or homes, institutions that were lost: And when were the first homes lost?

Cimperman:

The innerbelt changed the Tremont Community in that. . .it divided the entire community, and it forced people to more to the suburbs forced them to move out of the city. Many, many historic homes were lost and institutions and it's a good question. when you asked, when the first homes were lost. They were lost about 50 years ago when the first phase of the innerbelt was put in. The second phase of homes that were lost, were lost about 25 years ago when I-490 was put in, and the reason that it was easy to pick on Tremont was because the economy was poor in the neighborhood. People still hand English as a second language, and there was a sense that you couldn't fight for what you had. So as a result of that, people left the neighborhood. And we are now crisscrossed by freeways which we also talked about earlier, is something that could actually benefit the neighborhood, but at the time really divided the neighborhood and pushed people out of the neighborhood when they wanted to stay there. People relocated in the cities of Parma, and the cities of Seven Hills, Broadview Heights, anywhere that the freeways would take them to. And did they receive any help from the city? I don't know. I know that ODOT paid them pennies on the dollar for what their houses were worth.

Haller:

What do you know about West 14th Street, the old West 14th Street being a historic area with old homes?

Cimperman: Yeah

Haller: Can you describe that?

Cimperman: It's beautiful. It still maintains some its grandeur, especially if you go from. . . . They call it the 'Miracle Mile' partially because there's so many churches on the street. There's probably more churches on that one section of the mile of a city street than are in many other portions of the city. Some of the grand Victorian mansions that still exist I think are remnants of what used to be more on the street. But once the freeway came in with the undermining of the road, not only the I-90, I-71 project, but also the I-490 project which took out streets at a time some of the historical integrity of the neighborhood was sacrificed. And so part of the problem is that we lost some of the larger homes that we had in the neighborhood, but we at the same time, we still have a few reminders of what used to be.

Haller:

What long term changes would you like to see in Tremont?

Cimperman:

I would like to see Tremont continue to be a neighborhood that invests in its diversity. We have people who are from every economic background, racial background, ethnic background, philosophical and political background. And what long term changes I would like to see would be. . . . What I would like to see is a continuing growth of that diversity. The neighborhood is strong in that it isn't homogenous. It is not vanilla. When you walk through the street you don't feel that you're looking at Wonderbread™. You've got people who are Appalachian, people who are gay, people who are Latino, people who are African-American, people who are you know -- lawyers in law firms, and people who are single moms trying to help their kids, and you've got a variety of different kinds of people. That's why people like Tremont. That's what we have to preserve. I would like to see is that long term preservation because that's what's going to keep that neighborhood strong.

Haller:

How will these changes be accomplished?

Cimperman:

They will be accomplished by policies that support. . . .
People being able to stay in the neighborhood if they want to,
terms of having their. . . . being able to have their homes fixed up as they need to,
by embracing the different political ideas in the neighborhood,
by supporting the institutions that support our senior citizens, and our children,
by keeping the school open,
by ensuring that we preserve our outreach to our senior citizens and
by continuing to invite new people into the neighborhood who are coming from different
places who want to call the city their home.

Haller:

What would you like for your lasting legacy to be for Tremont?

Cimperman:

That I did everything I could to connect the resources of the City of Cleveland to the people in Tremont, firstly. Secondly, that I would be remembered for working as hard as I could to nurture the vision of a Tremont that welcomes people from every background, and different idea and ideal. Thirdly, that there. . .that the neighborhood is more stable now than it was five years ago. I think that is something that just happens naturally, but as a council person you can play a role in terms of supporting that, not supporting it, or hurting it. And I'm hopeful that I would be considered one of the people who was part of the army who tried to make a stable Tremont.

Haller:

Thank you, Mr. Cimperman for participating in Tremont's Oral History Project.

Cimperman:

Thank you.