

A yard that developers covet
Holding out for their home
Stelzer Road no longer a quiet country lane, but some folks are staying put
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Sandi and James Holland moved to their Stelzer Road house 26 years ago. Developers want to buy the property between Easton Town Center and Port Columbus.

igns from commercial developers bloom along the last undeveloped strip of Stelzer Road.

Cars race along the four-lane thoroughfare: to the airport, to Easton Town Center, to CityGate Business Park, to an I-670 interchange.

Sandi and James Holland moved to Stelzer Road 26 years ago, when it was a bumpy, two-lane backstretch. The neighbors had barbecues and raised goats and chickens. Folks watched out for one another. The few holdouts still do.

They moved to the country, only to be swallowed up as Columbus grew into a big city. Deer still come to their doorsteps.

Developers do, too; but despite the lure of big money, these folks are staying put.

"This is my home," James Holland said, pointing out his screen door. "We got married in the front yard, right by that big tree."

The Hollands raised three children on 2 acres. A couple of years ago, a developer offered Mr. Holland \$75,000 an acre -- an insult, he figures, given the value of his house.

A neighbor was offered \$95,000 an acre.

And two years ago, a 2.6-acre lot at the southwestern corner of Stelzer Road and Citygate Drive sold for \$1 million.

Light industry and commerce are the Hollands' new neighbors. A home next door is now up for sale. About eight families remain on the stretch of road.

David White of Powell describes the decision to part with his family home as bittersweet.

His mother, Jane, died in 1992; his father, Harold, died in 1994. He refused earlier offers to sell so his parents would never have to leave their dream home.

But last year, the final phase of a project that widened Stelzer Road ended near his old front yard. With the four lanes came sanitary sewers, sidewalks and streetlights.

"It's coming of age," White said. "You can't fight progress."

His family moved to "the boondocks" in 1956, he said. "This house was my father's dream. TWA was still flying prop planes out of the airport, and there was a horse farm where 670 now is."

Franklin County commissioners approved annexing White's 4 acres at 1793 Stelzer Rd. to Columbus last week, priming it for development.

County Engineer Dean C. Ringle also asked for the remaining unincorporated strip of Stelzer Road to follow, allowing the city to simplify maintenance.

With their road now in the big city but their land in Mifflin Township, residents fear that development will press down even harder.

Frank and Frances Doherty already have turned down several real-estate agents.

From their front yard, they've watched development creep in over 35 years: First the county filled in the ditches, where unlucky drivers crashed. Then came I-670, Easton, the airport expansion and the road-widening.

The \$12 million roadway project, completed last year, widened the last 1.8-mile stretch between McCutcheon Road and the I-670 overpass.

The county paid 72 homeowners and 23 commercial-property owners \$1.7 million for land. The homeowners lost lawn, but Ringle said the road, sewer and other improvements increased their property values.

Development is now racing south of Easton. A Giant Eagle is being built, and an 11,000-square-foot retail center at Agler and Stelzer roads is leasing quickly, said Todd Appelbaum, a broker with Equity Inc.

"The changes (along Stelzer) have been dramatic," he said. "I would have never thought it would be so successful. Easton has been the catalyst. It has created an incredible market. With less and less land at Easton, people are going to look farther out."

Within the next decade, he predicts, the remaining homeowners will be tempted: "The land is of such value that people will sell out."

Auditor's maps show the trend. More than half the parcels were transferred since 2002 in the half-mile strip between Citygate Drive and Ole Country Lane, where the Hollands and Dohertys live. Appraised values for parcels now range from \$10,000 to \$1 million.

But Mr. Doherty is thinking only of his summer garden: tomatoes, cabbage, radishes, peppers and maybe some okra for soups. The value of his land is that his home is on it, Doherty said: "They'll carry me out of here."

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