



## A Vision Statement for Mariemont

### *Vision 2021 Redux*

*“Dr. Emmett Brown: You’ve got to come back with me!”*

*Marty McFly: Where?”*

*Dr. Emmett Brown: Back to the future!”*

**By Mike Lemon and Richard Wendel**

In November 2008, the Mariemont Preservation Foundation (MPF) undertook to craft a bold plan called **Vision 2021** to act as a guide for steering Mariemont into the next decade. MPF methodically collected input from hundreds of interested parties representing the entire spectrum of opinion. This included businesses, social organizations, boards and commissions, school officials, elected officials, Village employees and students

The MPF Vision 2021 Committee was composed of respected Village leaders including Richard Adams, Don Keyes, Frank Raeon, Millard Rogers, Jr. and David Zack. Working as a team, they compiled a 50 page document containing their findings. In January 2011, the Vision Plan 2021 was referred by Mayor to the Economic Development and Planning Committee for a report and recommendations. After no report was made by the committee for months, in September 2011 MPF’s leadership attended a council meeting and recommended that the Village’s elected officials appoint a broad based Vision Commission. Specifically, the Mayor was encouraged to spearhead the effort to assemble a Vision Committee comprised of 15 respected volunteers.

Council debated elements of the plan. However, neither the Mayor nor Council moved forward on the Vision 2021 Plan proposal, nor did they modify it or develop an alternate plan. After many additional months with no report or action taken by the Economic Development and Planning Committee or the Mayor, the topic was inexplicably dropped from the Council Agenda after April 2012.

**Now let’s examine the potential benefits to the Village had the Mariemont Vision 2021 Plan been adopted in 2012 and used as a blueprint for future developments in Mariemont:**

After reviewing the Vision 2021 Plan, the Mariemont council accepted and committed to the MPF plan as a guideline for the future. An ad hoc Vision 2021 Commission with 15 members was formed.

Several full-day retreats were held to condense, prioritize and financially analyze the recommendations in Vision 2021. The last retreat was used to craft the final version of the mission statement and strategic plan. The mission statement expressed a goal to sustain and improve upon the quality of life for all Mariemont residents. Included in the plan were calls to engage the community in every phase of the planning and implementation process.

Council immediately formed a search committee to hire an experienced public operations manager as a Village Administrator with a defined range of duties. In addition, Council engaged a consulting firm to facilitate the development of a final and doable strategic plan for economic development and cultural enrichment.

### ***Fiscal Sustainability***

With the continued loss of revenues from the State of Ohio and inheritance taxes, Council and the Vision 2021 Commission recognized the budgetary shortfalls that were projected for the years to come. This ratcheting down of State revenues was compounded by the shrinking employment in the Westover industrial park and the phasing out of its largest business. For these reasons alternate pathways to fulfill budgetary needs were considered.

1. JEDZ (Joint Economic Development Zones) with surrounding communities were seized upon as one obvious means to fill some of the funding gaps. These partnerships with local townships generated hundreds of thousands of dollars yearly in unfettered revenue. This permitted the Village to move forward on infrastructure improvements and cover the increasing cost of services without increasing taxes to residents and businesses.
2. The Economic Development and Planning Committee of Council identified types of businesses needed to enhance the economic base and developed tactics to recruit them. To stimulate economic development, tools such as the Community Reinvestment Area (CRAs), Tax Increment Financing (TIFs), and a Community Investment Corporation (CIC) were employed. Additionally, State and Local grants were applied for and relationships with the Marie Emery Foundation trustees improved. As a result of these funding sources, new businesses took root in Mariemont. Collectively, these measures had the effect of revitalizing the entire business community and enabling commercial property owners to maintain full occupancy.
3. The strategic plan also caused the Village to seek additional savings by shared services with surrounding communities that did not compromise safety or conveniences. This produced a cultural shift in Village governance from structured independence and political stagnation to one of cooperation and coordination.

The new financial projections derived from these three initiatives suggested to Council that no new taxes would be necessary even as the Village proceeded with needed improvements in infrastructure.

### ***Village Quality of Life***

With a mission statement to preserve and improve the quality of life for residents, Village officials collaborated with community groups and businesses to achieve those goals and objectives.

1. With a larger pool of operating funds, the Village was able to keep trash and recyclable collection in the rear or side of residences thus providing convenience to residents and keeping the streets and driveways free of bulky containers that detracted from the curb appeal of homes and businesses. Indeed, this distinguishing feature helped to maintain the Village's reputation as the most walkable community in Cincinnati and provided a significant talking point for real-estate agents.
2. The Master Plan for the South 80 developed by the Parks Advisory Board and consultants brought into focus an expanded range of uses for this park/farmland in the flood plain. Safety issues and crowded spaces around the Dogwood Park playfields during baseball and soccer seasons helped to focus the Parks Advisory Board and landscape designers on the potential of the South 80. They produced a schematic of the layout for additional ball fields and walking paths. Their layout included:

- a. A new wider access road and large graveled parking area.
- b. A dog park
- c. Picnic shelter and grounds
- d. A fitness trail/parcourse
- e. Expanded acreage for gardening along with a storage shed supplied with water and electric
- f. Two regulation baseball fields
- g. Two soccer fields
- h. A circumferential paved bike path

*Although flooding occurs, on average, every three years in this flood plain, the structures were built to make clean-up relatively simple. These ambitious plans were made possible through economic development incentives from new businesses and became a regional attraction for local sports and recreational activities. Meanwhile, ODOT tabled the Eastern Corridor project because of funding and engineering problems and the Oasis Rail Line project was abandoned because it was not economically feasible.*

3. With the help of volunteers, new flower beds and landscaping highlighted a broader range of Village events. The Village's natural environment was compartmentalized into two landscape maintenance categories: Land Management and Landscape Maintenance. By differentiating these areas, financial reserves set aside earlier were released for the high visibility areas in the Village while giving attention to other important lands. The endowment fund established for parks and the Town Center provided additional funds for capital improvements to the parks. The on-going tree planting and replacement program, based on John Nolen's original plan, drew wide acclaim for protecting the existing urban forest in the Village. The efforts of the Tree Advisory Committee and the accredited urban forester helped minimize the damage created by insect infestations, helped protect property values, and maintained the beautiful visual ambience of the community.
4. Concerts in the Park and an amphitheater at the Concourse were planned to satisfy music lovers. Funds to market the Carillon concerts to the surrounding area were set aside to increase the audience for these World Class performances, a unique attraction in Mariemont. The 4th of July fireworks became a Village Government sponsored annual event.
5. Gas and electric aggregation to save on utility bills became available to all residents along with Duke Energy's Smart Grid for energy efficiency. Aggregation eliminated the need to search for the 'best provider and rates' by individual household or business, even as that remained an option.
6. Information about fire prevention and voluntary home and business inspections were offered. Carbon monoxide monitors made homes safer and lowered home insurance. CPR training, infant car seat installation and other programs made available through the Village improved community safety.
7. Although a national historic landmark, the Village adapted to the digital and technological age by becoming a wired community, with Wi-Fi accessible throughout the Village business districts.
8. The enhanced Village web site included interactive abilities to file taxes, apply and pay for building permits, swim and tennis passes and pay trash collection fees. The site also provided residents a community and recreational activities calendar.

*After having fallen out of the top 20 in the 50 Greater Cincinnati suburban rankings in Cincy Magazine, Mariemont was once again ranked as a top ten community in Greater Cincinnati and closed in on Number One.*

### **Village Gateways**

A new roundabout at the 6-way intersection announced the entrance into the Village, an English Garden City, while safely guiding motorists through what had been a confusing and difficult intersection. The roundabout created a dynamic threshold between communities rather than a wall preventing shared values from being nurtured and grown. This landmark's quality improvements and landscape spurred the bike path connection to the Fairfax and Newtown Road paths and spawned an economic development project on the Village's northern boundary, replacing aging and declining properties. The development brought scores of new customers and clients to Mariemont businesses which expanded and brought new jobs and new revenue to the community.

### ***Historic District***

The aging Village historic district apartments and townhouses breathed new life as a Community Improvement Corporation (CIC) resulting from the JEDZ revenues channeled new funds into renovating and rehabbing the aging structures. The CIC purchased and renovated the buildings to preserve the historical integrity of the buildings before selling them to private investors. The improvements and new amenities brought a renewal to the district and strong demand for the living units.

The recruitment of retail space and antique stores to the Old Town Square as part of the economic development plans adopted by council succeeded partly as a result of the renovated properties and renewed interest in the area.

### ***Transportation***

New sidewalks, new curbing and expanded parking became available from the JEDZ revenue, long term public financing and freeing of permanent improvement money to undertake street improvements. A new underground parking garage behind the theatre and restaurants doubled the number of parking spaces which brought a huge increase in customers. Council's decision to address long-standing issues around parking availability paid huge dividends in new business, visitors and revenue.

Village traffic and safety measures were implemented based on scientific and historical data illustrating the need for change rather than perceived threats or danger. Professional analysis and engineering ended the signage proliferation that detracted from the attractiveness of the Village.

### ***Town Meeting and Civic Association***

Town Meetings focused on community engagement and development, as well as communicating the state of the Village, greatly increasing attendance. Identifying Village needs and establishing task forces to address them were welcome changes from the past. Attendance at Town Meetings and membership in the Civic Association soared and residents became more engaged in bettering the Village and preserving its heritage. Indeed, increased attention given at Town Meeting to nominating candidates for elected Village positions with a diverse range of skills, knowledge and abilities helped foster the leadership to address the future needs of the Village.

***The first spade of earth for the construction of Mariemont was turned by Mary Emery in 1923. In 2023 the Village celebrated the centennial of the founding of Mariemont. The dream of Mary Emery for a "National Exemplar" had moved a little closer to reality.***

**This vision of the Village's future is achievable but it will take vision and leadership to accomplish it. Adopting a vision plan, such as MPF's Vision 2021 is a giant first step toward achieving it.**

*"Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality. "—Warren Bennis*