

## Many residents along Grand Prix course excited

by Childs Walker, *The Baltimore Sun*, Sept. 2, 2011

Sharon and Bill Reuter moved to Ridgely's Delight in 1986, before Ravens perched a few blocks away and before Camden Yards evoked anything more than a faded industrial past.

When the city and state got serious about building a ballpark just across Russell Street, the Reuters hated the idea. "We thought it was just horrible," Bill Reuter recalled. "Thank goodness we lost, because it turned out to be the best thing for this area."

The Reuters kept that experience in mind as they adjusted to the idea of the Baltimore Grand Prix, which will send racecars whizzing within shouting distance of their rowhouse this weekend.

"We live downtown because we like downtown events," Sharon Reuter said, explaining her excitement about the race. "We weren't baseball fans before the stadium came, and now we are. We weren't football fans before the Ravens came, and now we are. So with this, it's like, 'OK, well, bring it on.'"

Throughout Ridgely's Delight and Otterbein, the two residential neighborhoods most closely pressed against the 2.1-mile Grand Prix course, neighbors expressed variations of the same attitude as the race weekend neared. Though some planned to flee town because of the traffic and noise, many are eager to experience a new spectacle, saying that's why they moved to the heart of the city.

"There's never a dull moment downtown, and that's the joy of it," said Chris Conlon, president of the Ridgely's Delight homeowners association. "I've never been a huge racing fan, but I've always been a fan of pushing the threshold. I think this is going to be a sight to see."

Conlon is cutting short a trip to Las Vegas so he can fly back for Sunday's IndyCar race, the weekend's main event.

But some neighbors are heading out of town because they want nothing to do with the race.

Annette Hopkins of Ridgely's Delight hates that the city spent millions of dollars, tore up trees and snarled traffic for an event she regards as a eyesore.

"I'm amazed that I'm paying taxes to live next to a racetrack," Hopkins said. "It's the least green thing that the city could do. The noise is going to be awful. Medical people who work nights won't be able to sleep. The air will be full of debris from the tires. Why would I want to stay here for that?"

She left town Wednesday and won't be back until "long after it's over."

The Grand Prix was always an easier sell for the restaurants, shops and hotels that line most of the racecourse. Thousands of spectators could mean millions of extra dollars for business owners.

But the appeal was less obvious for those who live in the oft-quiet enclaves of Otterbein and Ridgely's Delight. For three days, the noisiest swarm of hornets imaginable will buzz past their homes. Revelers will cascade past their front steps on foot. A routine as simple as driving to the supermarket will be difficult.

City Councilman William H. Cole IV, who represents neighborhoods around the course, was among the most ardent advocates for bringing the Grand Prix to Baltimore. He believed the city couldn't turn away from a potential boon to tourism, but he knew he had to sell the idea to constituents who felt little affinity for car racing.

"Without support from the neighborhoods around the track, we would never have even tried it," Cole said.

To win acceptance, Cole helped form a community panel that met monthly with race organizers and participated in planning the event. Cole and Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake also urged the organizers to distribute \$100,000 to community associations near the course for beautification projects.

In Otterbein, the association will use its \$12,500 to spruce up parks. In Ridgely's Delight, neighbors used their \$18,000 to hire the Downtown Partnership to do extensive street cleaning. In Sharp-Leadenhall, community leaders plan to pay neighborhood children to clean the streets.

"Neighborhoods never really get anything out of these events except for the inconvenience," Cole said. "We wanted it to be different in this case."

For the two high-rise senior centers near the course, organizers agreed to fund daily bus trips to Annapolis, Hollywood Casino in Perryville and the Smithsonian Institution. About 30 percent of the residents from Hanover Square and Christ Church Harbor Apartments have signed up, Cole said.

"It's a good thing that they're doing," said Christ Church manager Cindy Berardino. "This is something that's certainly out of the routine for our residents. Some are excited, but some are unnerved."

Organizers said they tried to address every major concern. Tow trucks are slated to be on hand to haul away vehicles parked in residential areas without permits. All races are scheduled to end before dark, accommodating residents' requests.

Cole said he never expected to win everyone over.

As the race weekend drew closer, he said, "I just know someone is going to call me at 8:15 on Friday morning and say, 'These cars are loud!' We can't fix that. But I think we've planned for everything else."

Hopkins said Cole and other city leaders misled residents about the extent of traffic disruptions and failed to produce convincing evidence of the race's economic benefits. Challengers to Rawlings-Blake in the Sept. 13 mayoral primary have made similar points.

Many neighbors, however, said they were impressed with the efforts to keep them abreast of race planning. "I told Bill Cole that it was never going to fly if they didn't get the neighbors behind it," Bill Reuter said. "But they've done a good job of at least letting us know what we're up against."

Ridgely's Delight residents educated themselves as well, holding two Grand Prix 101 courses on the second floor of a nearby tavern with help from a former neighbor who went on to write a racing blog.

The Reuters took their quest for information a step further, traveling to St. Petersburg, Fla., for a spring road race to get a sense of what they were in for. They learned that the cars are, in fact, loud. But they were pleasantly surprised by the affluence of the crowd and the festive atmosphere around the track.

"It was fun," Sharon Reuter said. "Like a Preakness feel. Not that crazy, but a party atmosphere."

The Reuters are hosting friends from Florida who are eager to see the race and said that, in general, they know of a lot more people coming in for the event than fleeing it.

Thousands of residents of South Baltimore have bought race tickets, Cole said. Many planned to run in the Grand Prix's 5K foot race on Friday night. In Ridgely's Delight, one resident planned to screen car-themed movies all weekend. In Otterbein, residents planned outdoor barbecues and crab feasts.

Bob Muir, who lives less than two blocks from the Conway Street section of the course, plans to host a cookout in his alley after Sunday's race.

"A lot of people down here like this kind of excitement," he said. "We moved from Howard County 10 years ago because we like the baseball, the football, the symphony, the great restaurants. I think this a great opportunity to showcase the city."

Others in Otterbein spoke of the race creating closer bonds between neighbors.

"People seem to be hunkering down and looking forward to spending the weekend together, which we don't get a chance to do that often," said Daniel Bachmann, president of Otterbein's neighborhood association.

Bachmann works nearby, on the 23rd floor of an office building on East Pratt Street. Despite the expected inconvenience of Friday's commute, he said his office mates were excited about watching the cars whip by below. Some invited clients to share in the viewing.

"I just think it's going to be really cool to see these open-wheel vehicles flying down Pratt Street," he said.

At heart, the residents of Otterbein and Ridgely's Delight consider themselves a resilient bunch. For years, they've dealt with stadium patrons parking in their spaces and urinating in their alleys. They've had to shout over the hum of airplanes carrying advertisements over Ravens games. They simply can't believe that any event will be too much for them to handle.

"I don't think it will be any worse than a big Ravens-Steelers game," Bill Reuter said. "And we get through those just fine."