

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)



Charles Village has been named one of the top 10 places to live in the US.

Charles Village named a top 10 neighborhood

American Planning Association praises community's quality of life

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The American Planning Association (APA) has named Charles Village as one of 10 "Great Neighborhoods in America" for 2008.

This year, the APA judged several thousand neighborhoods based on categories such as form and composition, character and personality, environment and sustainability practices. Charles Village earned praise from APA reviewers because of "the neighborhood's strong and dedicated activist community, economic and social diversity and memorable character enhanced by designs from the renowned Olmsted Brothers firm" according to the APA Web-site.

According to APA research associate Tre Jordan, the Great Places in America Program seeks to celebrate outstanding American neighborhoods and public places, highlighting the successes of such communities and the successes of the planning of the communities. Jordan believes that Charles Village has seen its problems, but it's also quite notable for its achievements.

"It is a designation program. There is no jury per se, but there are multiple steps of review. Our list spans a range of different places because this is a designation program, so we're looking at places over the country," Director of APA Designations Denny Johnson said.

"We looked at several factors - the social implications and the economic implications among other things. It wasn't a broad checklist, so we didn't expect a neighborhood to have everything," Jordan said.

When a former Baltimorean APA director nominated Charles Village for the 2007 ranking, the absence of a streetcar service, the scarcity of affordable housing and the rarity of entertainment and culture for non-students lowered its standing. However, according to Johnson, Charles Village had the same strengths and weakness this year as it did in 2007, but it was not selected last year due to too many designations in this area of the country.

"There are a lot of different factors we look at. One of the things we try to do is get a geographical range of places. We didn't want to load up with a lot of places in this area," Johnson said. "Charles Village is no less of a candidate because of being distinguished this year instead of last year. Nothing really

changed between last year and this year, but this year we said this deserves more careful consideration."

Jordan pointed to the strong community atmosphere as a key reason for Charles Village's high ranking.

"One of the good things about Charles Village is the [Charles Village Community] Benefits District. The Benefits District was founded in 1994. It's funded by a minimal levy on property values. The District was able to cut down the crime rate and served as a model for other communities in Baltimore," he said.

"The strengths of Charles Village are its community associations and the way that people work together on issues that concern them - safety, sanitation and economic revitalization. Community coordination is a big strength," Charles Village Community Benefits District Management Authority Executive Director David Hill said.

Hill also pointed to proposed future projects that would enhance the accessibility of Charles Village. "There is a streetcar project underway that's gaining a bit of momentum. The proposed streetcar would run from the Harbor to Hopkins. It seems to be gaining strength. It's a real serious proposal," he said.

"Public transportation in and out of the inner city can be a hassle, but even traffic congestion is not something to complain about. That's one of the reasons Charles Village is so attractive - it's near the city but not in the city," Johnson said.

Johnson noted some other points that made the neighborhood stand out from the thousands of other contest applicants.

"They have interesting architecture and amenities. The Omsted brothers laid out some of the community like the parks, so that stood out, as did Victorian homes along Charles Street. The Omsted brothers designed the 16-acre Wyman Park Dell - that just stands out. Omsted Senior helped design Central Park. His brothers continued and that was the next generation of Omsteds. To have that level of design - it's like having a Frank Lloyd Wright house in your neighborhood."

"The other things we're interested in are diversity - social diversity, ethnic diversity and socioeconomic diversity. Charles Village has that," Johnson said.

"It is a nice neighborhood. It's diverse - it's got a nice mix of students and regular folk who are well-off but not too well-off. It's greatly helped by the bookstore," resident Brenda Davies said.

Hopkins graduate student Fouad Fawaz, who moved to Charles Village at the beginning of the school year, agreed.

"[Charles Village] is beautiful in its own way, [and isolated] from the whole city," he said. "It's orderly compared to the rest of the city and more associated with Johns Hopkins. And it has access to everything, like the supermarket."

While Hill anticipates the use of the APA designation in city advertisements to draw more people to Charles Village, he said that being a Great Neighborhood entails more than winning a contest - it is a recognition of effective community-building and social security that do more than simply attract prospective residents.

"I've only lived here two years," he said. "I know people who've lived here since the '70s. It tends to be a place where people come to stay."

Charles Village shares the 2008 unranked designation with towns including Downtown Salem, Mass.; Downtown Sheridan, Wyo.; Echo Park near Los Angeles, Calif.; Greater Park Hill near Denver, Colo.; Greater University Hill near Syracuse, N.Y.; North End near Boise, Idaho; Old Town near Wichita, Kans.; Society Hill near Philadelphia, Penn.; and the village of Mariemont, Ohio.

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