

## Highlands

The Highlands neighborhood is situated immediately south and east of the Penn State University campus and the Downtown core. It is bounded on the north by the Downtown Improvement District boundary, roughly following Highland Alley, Easterly Parkway to the south, Atherton Street to the west and University Drive to the east. The highest point in the neighborhood stands at an elevation of 1,200 feet; the Fairmount Avenue ridge line creates a sort of dividing line between the northern and southern parts of the neighborhood. The Highlands neighborhood is one of the few Borough neighborhoods that is not immediately adjacent to a neighboring municipality.

The northern area of the Highlands is among the oldest of the Borough's neighborhoods and a substantial portion of it is included as a registered National Historic District with 379 contributing historic structures. Annexations of

land that make up the area of the Highlands neighborhood took place from about 1909 to 1932. This land was then subdivided into plots for development. Some of these plots included Henzey-Lederer, Highland Park Addition, Highlands Plot, Highlands Extension, Lytle's Addition and Beaver Lawn.

At the time of the development of the Highlands, it was boasted that this area offered "the most desirable lots of Foster, Fairmount, Prospect and Hamilton, all within one-half mile of the post office" and with the promise of becoming "the most beautiful fraternity section in the country." Between 1925 and 1933, more than twenty mansions were built in the neighborhood for national fraternity organizations. At the same time, smaller houses were being built by residents including housing designed by architects, chosen from pattern books and selected from mail-order catalogs.



## Neighborhood Characteristics

As late as 1946, the Highlands neighborhood terminated at Irvin Avenue, where farms and forest existed immediately to the south. After World War II, a housing shortage resulted in the rapid development of forty duplex houses along Atherton Street and the construction of Easterly Parkway and Centre Lane. Much of the land moving east from these duplexes, however, was still farmland.

The Highlands Civic Association was incorporated in 1983. Since its formation, the Association has been an active organization with many residents serving on Borough ABC's, participating in volunteer and community organizations throughout the Region, taking an active role in government initiatives, and organizing community building activities like the Neighbor-to-Neighbor program. More information about the Highlands Civic Association can be found in Appendix X.

Today, the Highlands is the most populated of the Borough's neighborhoods and includes the greatest number of housing units. The neighborhood is representative of the diversity of housing and residents within the Borough. It includes a range of housing types, from large apartment structures and fraternity mansions, to modestly-sized single family homes. It is also home to a mix of residents including families, long-term Borough residents, faculty and staff of the University and Penn State undergraduates and graduates. It is a walkable neighborhood, with areas of mixed use, and commercial amenities, and is in close proximity to civic amenities such as churches and schools. Some residents have referred to the Highlands as the Borough's true "town-gown" neighborhood.

The population of the Highlands according to the 2010 Census was 9,276. This represents 23% of the total population of the Borough and a 5% decrease in the neighborhood's population since 1990. The Highlands has the greatest population of the Borough's neighborhoods, with only campus and downtown exceeding its population.

The vast majority of the neighborhood's residents are of college age between 18 and 24. All other age groups represent 23% of the neighborhood. Within the Highlands, 5.6% of the neighborhoods households include families with children. The Highlands is one of few neighborhoods in which more of those households with children live in rental

### Highlands by the Numbers

Population (2010)	9,726
% of Borough	23%
Age of Residents (2010)	
Under 18	5%
18-24	77%
25-34	8%
35-44	2%
45-64	5%
65 & up	3%
Occupied Housing Units (2010)	3,506
Owner-Occupied	88%
Renter-Occupied	12%
Increase in Units since 1994	5.6%
Registered Student Homes (2013)	94

housing than in owner-occupied housing. In the Highlands, 63% of households with school-aged children lived in rental housing, while only 37% lived in owner-occupied housing.

Of the neighborhood's 3,506 Occupied Housing Units, 12% are owner-occupied and 88% are renter-occupied. The Highlands is one of the Borough's neighborhoods with the highest proportions of renter-occupied housing, behind only the Orchard Park area with 89% renter-occupied housing. According to the Borough's Registered Student Home list in 2013, there were **94 single-family homes or duplexes registered with the Borough as Student Homes** in the Highlands neighborhood. This represents roughly 2.7% of the occupied housing units in the neighborhood. Finally, the neighborhood experiences only a 3% vacancy rate in its overall housing stock. Despite a very small decrease in population over the past 20 years, occupied housing units

have actually increased by 5.6% since 1994.

The neighborhood's land use continues to be a mix of residential, commercial and civic uses. While the predominant land use for the neighborhood remains residential, there is a diverse mix of housing types including high density housing, single-family home conversions, large fraternity houses and owner-occupied dwellings. There is a large district within the neighborhoods in which most of the Penn State Fraternity organizations have houses and a cooperative living space for young professionals and entrepreneurial students called the co.space. The Highlands has been a popular neighborhood for investment through the State College Community Land Trust and other first-time home buyer programs.

The neighborhood also abuts Downtown State College and the mix of commercial uses that exist in that district. Additionally, commercial uses border the southwest corner of the neighborhood along Atherton Street and the Hamilton Avenue Shopping Center.

In the State College Land Area Plan, much of the central part of the Highlands neighborhood is described as a transitional area. This means that this portion of the neighborhood functions as an area where land uses, housing type and density, and type of residents transition for more dense, intensive uses to less dense, less intense uses. (See the [Land Use map on page 31](#) and the [Housing Tenure map on page 37](#).)

According to the Centre Region Planning Agency's Growth Forecast Map for 2009-2040 the neighborhood is essentially built out; only a few opportunities for the construction of new single-family homes on vacant lots were identified. Additionally, the study identified some opportunity for the Easterly Parkway Office Park to be intensified to include



additional commercial office space and services. The State College Area School District's district-wide master plan indicates that as school facilities are constructed, there is an opportunity for the district's administrative and Delta Program functions located in buildings on Nittany Avenue to be relocated to other facilities. This could provide the opportunity for these buildings to be reused by the district for other functions or to be redeveloped.

There are a number of churches and buildings used for religious meetings adjacent to the neighborhood along the perimeter of downtown and contains the Friends Meeting House. The neighborhood is home to the Delta Program and the SCASD headquarters, is adjacent to Easterly Parkway Elementary and is within walking distance to State High and Penn State University. There are many human service agencies the neighborhood as well, including the Women's Resource Center, Housing Transitions, Centre House, and the Youth Service Bureau.

Many residents report that a strong quality of the Highlands neighborhood is the mature tree canopy that exists throughout the neighborhood. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources the neighborhood has approximately 50% coverage by mature tree canopy. This coverage helps with stormwater, air quality and urban heat island impacts in the neighborhood. (See the [Community Facilities map on page 41.](#))

Due to its close proximity to downtown, the University and several major vehicular routes, traffic and parking has historically been a significant concern to residents of the neighborhood. Recent traffic calming strategies such as speed tables and barricades preventing left turns in and out of certain neighborhood streets have helped to reduce some of the impacts of these traffic conditions. Additionally, changes to on-street parking regulations have helped reduce the number of inconveniences caused by residents

from illegal or non-resident parking. Traffic on University Drive, Atherton Street and Beaver Avenue continues to be a concern to the neighborhood in terms of their impacts on neighborhood continuity, safety, and accessibility of bus, bike and pedestrian routes. (See the [Transportation Systems map on page 39.](#))

Atherton Street carries heavy volumes of CATA bus traffic and Pugh Street and University Drive also accommodate bus routes. These routes provide connections to campus, downtown, and the commercial and residential areas along North Atherton in Ferguson and Patton Townships. While these routes pass through the neighborhood frequently, there are only a few access points for Highlands residents wishing to use the buses. However, residents do not seem to be concerned at the lack of bus service due to the close proximity to many amenities.



# Neighborhood SWOT Analysis

## Strengths

Highlands residents generally felt the diversity of the neighborhood was a strength. They indicated that neighborhood diversity includes residents of varying ages, income levels, educational backgrounds, and local affiliations. Many felt that they had good student neighbors most of the time, that the neighborhood is a great place for families to live, and that their neighbors are very engaged and resilient to the ever-changing nature of the neighborhood. Residents felt that the physical appearance of the neighborhood, with well-preserved architecture, mature landscaping and great public services should be protected. Finally, residents felt that the ease of travel in the neighborhood by walking and biking, and the close proximity to downtown, campus and other civic and cultural amenities made it a desirable place to live.



## Weaknesses

Due to the high concentration of renter-occupied housing in the neighborhood, new residents don't often have a chance to get assimilated to living in the neighborhood before a school year changes and new neighbors move in. Because of lifestyle conflicts, neighbors feel that the quality of their neighborhood has changed over time, and they feel that noise and safety concerns are becoming more pressing. Residents feel that rental housing management by both the Borough and by the landlords is an issue that needs to be addressed in order encourage more homeowners to move into the neighborhood and to retain the long-term, residents that currently live in the neighborhood. Additionally, due to the type of rental housing available, there are not many opportunities for young professional housing or affordable housing in the Highlands. Some residents felt that there are not enough opportunities for reuse of properties in transitional areas of the neighborhood, and that individuals that do not live in the neighborhood or the Borough can have a significant influence on the neighborhood's conditions. Finally, some residents felt that there was not enough information provided to policy-makers, which was negatively impacting conditions in the neighborhood.

## Opportunities

Residents felt that the Highlands neighborhood had the opportunity to become a good example of positive town-gown relations through community-building activities that appeal to not only permanent residents and families, but also to student neighbors. Student representatives felt that perhaps a mentor program could help teach new student-residents about appropriate behavior in the neighborhood and improve communications. Other opportunities identified by residents included implementing programs in the neighborhood that

could help with encouraging homeownership and matching Penn State faculty with available housing in the neighborhood. Another opportunity is to expand the Earned-Income Tax revenues by expanding the number of non-student residents in the neighborhood. Some residents felt that increasing the availability of neighborhood data, clearly explaining the causes of the trends, promoting better ties with Borough officials and more consensus on Borough-wide issues would help improve the conditions of the neighborhood. Adopting the State College Land Area Plan, investigating new zoning strategies, and increased enforcement of existing zoning and rental permit regulations provide opportunities for protecting and promoting a successful mix of uses in the neighborhood. Some residents feel that there needs to be more flexibility in the allowed reuse of existing structures in order to promote continued investment in the neighborhood. Finally, residents felt that an opportunity for the neighborhood included recognizing good fraternity neighbors and better marketing the benefits of living in the Borough to potential residents.

#### Threats

Residents feel that the increasing enrollment at Penn State, without the addition of on-campus student housing, is threatening the neighborhood's stability because the demand for student housing is shifted to the neighborhoods. The increasing availability of renter-occupied units in the neighborhood is dwindling the Earned Income Tax revenue and property values, and driving up the cost of public services. Neighborhood residents commented that the conversion of single-family homes to rental housing is impacting the desire of families to live in the neighborhood. Some residents felt that the population increase, traffic in the neighborhood and increasing crime were major threats to the neighborhood's quality of life. Some felt that oversight in rental housing enforcement and zoning that considers the

good of one property rather than the entire neighborhood were threats to the stability of the neighborhood's uses. Other neighborhood threats included the slow addition of multi-family structures, single-family conversions, lack of moderately priced housing, and families moving outside of the Borough.

#### SWOT at a Glance

- + Diversity of residents (age, income, education)
- + Good student neighbors most of the time
- + Great place for families; active, resilient residents
- + Architecture, mature trees, quality public services
- + Ease of travel; proximity to downtown, campus, other amenities
- Lifestyle conflicts, particularly noise, safety, petty crime
- Rental housing management, enforcement of ordinances
- Few opportunities for housing for young professionals and workforce housing
- Few opportunities for reuse/redevelopment
- Limited information to policy-makers on impacts of decisions
- Positive example of town-gown relations
- Encourage ownership and workforce housing
- More readily available data/communications on Borough issues
- New/updated tools for managing zoning and rentals
- Market neighborhoods as a great place to live
- ✗ Growth of PSU without additional on-campus housing
- ✗ Rental housing impacts on EIT, property values, infrastructure
- ✗ Housing conditions discourage ownership in Borough
- ✗ Oversight of rental housing and zoning issues
- ✗ Increasing population, traffic and crime
- ✗ Proposed Penn State natural gas line