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Freemason leads the way

It's human nature to take your own surroundings for granted, to see nothing but what's wrong: The pothole that inevitably catches your tire. The dog that barks every night.

Then strangers arrive. They don't notice the pothole because of the crape myrtles blooming everywhere. Can't hear the dog over the lapping of the waves.

Folks from the American Planning Association came to Norfolk a few months ago and saw what should be obvious: West Freemason is one of the great neighborhoods in America. Everybody, of course, is charmed by Freemason's cobblestone streets and old - and well-preserved - houses. But much of the honor is due to its resiliency.

"Norfolk's West Freemason neighborhood was almost completely destroyed by the British during the Revolutionary War," the APA wrote. "Since then, the neighborhood has faced obstacles and trials, including one in the 1960s that would have once again leveled the area. Because it survived, West Freemason contains the majority of Norfolk's pre-Civil War structures."

That puts the Norfolk neighborhood in some pretty eye-popping company. This year alone, the APA cited San Francisco's Chinatown; Downtown Decatur, Ga.; Kenwood in Minneapolis; Williamson Marquette in Madison, Wis., among others. Past honorees have included Baltimore's Fells Point; Ansley Park in Atlanta; Brooklyn's Park Slope.

The APA also gives an annual nod to great public spaces and streets. This year, West Beverly Street in the heart of Staunton made the list. Past honorees in Hampton Roads include Virginia Beach's Boardwalk, Historic Hilton Village in Newport News and Duke of Gloucester Street in Williamsburg.

The APA's criteria for great neighborhoods are grounded in the same principle that guides most urban planning today: Variety. And so the association honors memorable neighborhoods that mix commercial and residential uses, have different ways to get around, feature interesting and diverse architecture, encourage human interaction and community involvement, are safe and sustainable.

Goals like those are being pursued all over this region and America. Good to know that by those measures, one place in South Hampton Roads - West Freemason - is leading the way.

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