

"As I See It: Aggressive public action is needed in urban core"

By Troy Nash. Kansas City Star: May 15, 2007.

Kansas City Mayor Mark Funkhouser recently said that the first tax incentive proposal to reach him had "darn well better be on the East Side."

Funkhouser should be commended for his willingness to invest in neighborhoods east of Troost Avenue. For decades, our urban core has suffered from poverty, racism, crime and corruption, leading to malevolent neglect, poor services and decline.

The challenges in our inner city were not created overnight and will not be conquered immediately. Areas like the 3rd District most need high-quality, good-paying, stable jobs. Healthy communities cannot be built when residents are isolated from economic activity, decent employment, or quality neighborhood services.

Progress was made during the Emanuel Cleaver and Kay Barnes administrations. Economic development began in the Jazz District, a grocery chain opened a Troost location, and 39th Street and Prospect Avenue, one of the city's most blighted intersections, is now a TIF area.

The TIF allows for the construction of a quality grocery store and neighborhood services on four corners. These small, important victories capitalize on the urban core's vibrant social fabric.

Further victories are possible, but securing them will take more than just waiting for development to happen. Many citizens think tax incentive districts materialize on their own, and tenants are subsequently found. In fact, it is exceptionally rare to create a tax incentive zone without a committed tenant driving the process.

Consequently, most applications are for areas where companies feel the biggest profit can be made with minimum hassle. Inner-city communities with neglected infrastructure, low education levels, and little disposable income are not a high priority. Tragically, lack of investment and job creation partly create these conditions. The cycle is broken only through aggressive public action.

Downtown's renaissance, led with the vision of Barnes, shows that concerted effort can lead to economic rejuvenation in concentrated areas.

Funkhouser is right that we should do the same for the East Side. The mayor, council, city staff, and civic leadership must aggressively promote forgotten neighborhoods. They will have to "sell" the advantages of urban development. Corporate leaders must accept responsibility to work in the urban core, a responsibility long deferred with claims of that it could not be profitable.

There are profits to be made in the inner city, with legitimacy and community consciousness, and leaders cannot settle for just any economic activity. The 3rd District, for example, already has more than its fair share of liquor stores and salvage yards.

Even as they ensure that downtown is successful, our leaders must make continued economic development in the urban core a reality.