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Title: Neighborhood leaders want city investment - Now it's time to give neighborhoods some attention, advocates say.

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The Kansas City Star's profiles of neighborhoods and our "state of the neighborhoods" report card showed conditions and trends were improving in city neighborhoods so far this decade.

The main exception: City Hall's investment in them. This, then, is what neighborhood and community leaders are focusing on to make neighborhoods even better.

A growing combination of leaders and groups are clamoring for the city government's attention again. They want new solutions to some of the most pressing and long-standing shortcomings of city neighborhoods.

Fair or not, they look to city services and spending as yardsticks for how neighborhoods are doing and being treated. Neighborhood advocates feel the pendulum of City Hall's attention has swung high to one side, the side of downtown's redevelopment. They'd like that pendulum to swing back toward neighborhood-oriented spending.

"We should take the same momentum and commitment that's been taken toward downtown, and apply it to neighborhoods," City Councilman Troy Nash said. "It's the neighborhoods turn now."

Residents can start by understanding their neighborhoods better. Beginning today, The Star offers on its Web site (KansasCity.com) a searchable database with a complete list of statistics and rankings for neighborhood clusters in all quality-of-life measures. You can see where your individual neighborhood needs some help.

As for neighborhoods as a whole, what can be done? Interviews with dozens of city officials, neighborhood residents and business leaders provide consensus on a few answers. Each requires more action and results from City Hall:

Rental housing

Perhaps no issue irks and concerns urbanites like run-down rental properties. These are the homes with sagging gutters or collapsing porches, and with renters who don't keep up their yards or leave furniture at the curb when they move out.

Said Barbara Johnson, a board member of the Oak Park Neighborhood Association: "We can't seem to do a lot about it."

Indeed, the city's current system is hampered by weak laws and inadequate enforcement. Earlier this year, one task force recommended a new rental housing inspection program with landlord inspection fees.

But the City Council and Mayor Kay Barnes didn't want to go that far. Instead, the city intends to hire a "rental property czar" to study the issue some more and suggest less drastic changes.

"Sometimes, you don't have to change the system but just increase the oversight," Barnes said in an interview.

This fall, though, a report from a citizens housing policy committee called for an extensive inspection program in targeted neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the clamor continues for the city to get tougher on inattentive landlords.

"The public has a right to know that the city has fashioned no legal remedy to force out-of-state investors to repair houses," said Sid Willens, a longtime lawyer and community activist.

Services

In recent years, the city government has taken steps, in programs like ServiceFirst, to improve the efficiency of city services. What the city hasn't done, in many cases, is improve the amount of services.

The Star's neighborhoods report card found city spending on most neighborhood-oriented services declined from 2000 to 2005, after accounting for inflation. Vacant lot cleanups -- down. Demolitions of decrepit, vacant buildings -- down. Water-line maintenance -- down.

Even some services where the city showed improvement were a statistical mirage. Funding for both boulevard maintenance and tree trimming were up in fiscal 2005, the latest year The Star considered, then both plunged in subsequent city budgets.

"We need some better leadership," said Eva Schulte, executive director of the Kansas City Church Community Organization, which has been lobbying City Hall to pay more attention to neighborhoods.

The mayor and council elections are coming up early next year. Yet whoever leads the city will have their hands tied somewhat.

A series of city reports have described mounting "financial pressures" on the city because of rising debt payments, unfunded commitments and tax-increment financing obligations. That means there's less flexibility in the city budget to boost neighborhood funding.

"We have some major investment issues for our neighborhoods," City Manager Wayne Cauthen said.

Crumbling streets and sewers

So far this decade, Kansas City voters have passed two bond issues to repave streets, repair parks and replace sewers. That's obviously provided some help, but the city is actually falling further behind in dealing with its crumbling and cracking infrastructure.

Take a look at some statistics: The city's newest capital improvements plan estimated that roads, bridges, parks and the like needed \$3.79 billion worth of work, while the city's projected funding covered just \$587 million of that work.

That means the city expects to meet just 16 percent of its infrastructure needs. Just a few years ago, the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce determined the city was meeting 25 percent of its infrastructure needs.

That was alarming, and now it's even worse.

Residents feel this whenever, for instance, they cross the state line from bumpy city roads to smoother suburban streets.

The chamber has studied this issue for more than a decade and is issuing a new report this month that "more needs to be done," in the words of chamber senior vice president Kristi Wyatt. A new chamber vision for the city calls for renewing a capital improvements sales tax. But other sources of money will be needed, too, if the city is serious about making more headway.

This is something candidates for mayor are beginning to talk about.

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