

Nash targets ground zero of blight

By Jim Davis. Kansas City Business Journal: August 18, 2000.

Kansas City Councilman Troy Nash this week introduced a comprehensive economic development plan for the city's impoverished East Side, which he represents.

"There is a true division out there -- more of a disconnect between the haves and the have-nots," said Nash, who in July staged a weeklong vigil on the crime-ridden corner of 39th Street and Prospect Avenue. "Many people have given up on the old system. The welfare state has failed."

The Prospect corridor initiative, which covers part of Nash's Third District, aims to amass a broad-based assault on economic and social problems that long have enfeebled the East Side, where much of Kansas City's African American population lives.

Nash wants to harness economic development tools, such as tax increment financing, to reduce crime and tame blight. TIF money could be used to build businesses, with input from community and church leaders.

Nash also wants to develop a public-private partnership of city government officials and top business executives. Equally important, he said, is engaging the people the initiative will affect. The backbone of this effort, he said, is the Kansas City FOCUS plan, an updated master plan for the city's development whose goals include rebuilding neighborhoods in the urban core.

"I am a FOCUS fanatic," Nash said. "It's a great way to involve neighborhood businesses and residents."

'Give these people jobs'

At the forefront of the campaign is James Johnson, co-owner of The A-B Store, which sells liquor and other packaged goods at 3901 Prospect Ave.

Johnson, whose group has owned the store for five years, also owns three parcels around 39th and Prospect that he wants to develop with businesses that would serve the neighborhood -- a convenience store, coin laundry and fast-food restaurant. He also hopes to build two senior citizens centers.

To make this investment, Johnson said he wants to tap the same kind of economic incentives that have been provided to other blighted parts of Kansas City.

Nash called the idea sensible and said he'll pursue any benefits that are appropriate, including tax increment financing.

TIF, which earmarks taxes generated by a development to help cover the cost of related public improvements, has been used throughout Kansas City -- from Downtown to the Country Club Plaza to the Northland. But Nash said the tool hasn't been applied to the most blighted areas because no developers have wanted to make investments, even with incentives.

Johnson said his group wants to build to support its existing store, which derives about half of its revenues from liquor sales. He acknowledged that drug dealers and prostitutes are drawn to the area but said that closing his store isn't the best way to eliminate this activity.

"We need some economic development," he said. "The only way you can keep it from being a place where the criminal element comes is to give these people jobs."

Johnson, 50, who retired this year from Ford Motor Co.'s Claycomo assembly plant, said inner-city residents lack money, education and pride. Unless they can find more ways to earn money legally, he said, the downward spiral will continue.

"We're just going to have a lot of ignorance," he said.

A comprehensive strategy

Anna Mae Towner, president of the East Area Community Coalition, said her neighborhood group continually fields reports about problems around Johnson's store. But she said the cause isn't the store but rather its customers.

For a cleanup to work, she said, it must be widespread. Otherwise, criminals simply will move elsewhere.

Nash called 39th and Prospect ground zero but said the problem goes beyond the intersection. For that reason, his proposal addresses a broader area, running south from 25th Street to Brush Creek Boulevard and extending four blocks on either side of Prospect Avenue.

The strategy makes sense to Barry Mayer, division commander of the Kansas City Police Department's East Patrol, which covers Prospect Avenue from the Missouri River to Brush Creek.

"We can't do it with traditional policing," Mayer said. "When we take the time to do community policing and form partnerships, it makes a difference. Along with that, we need economic development to instill hope and pride."

Nash also wants to involve churches on the East Side to carry his message and build on such improvements as a proposed youth and family life center sponsored by Morning Star Baptist Church at 27th Street and Prospect Avenue.

Bill Nelson, who retired this year as Bank of America's chief executive in Kansas City, supports the church's program. He serves on the board of Morning Star Development Corp., which is leading a campaign to raise \$6.5 million from federal and city governments and private foundations.

Nelson's bank financed a successful shopping center at Linwood Boulevard and Prospect Avenue and has made other community development investments on the East Side. He has talked with Nash about his plan and said its grass-roots approach can work.

Terry Dunn, president of J.E. Dunn Construction Co., said that he likes Nash's ambition but that the councilman will have to focus attention to get the support he'll need to make the plan work.

Nash said he wants to develop a strategy that will become a national model for inner-city revival.

"As goes the core, so goes the rest of the city," he said. "You cannot run; you cannot hide. This is a metrowide initiative. We want to create an environment to unleash these people's creative capacity. There's a surplus of labor here. If we can connect these people with jobs, crime will go down."