

SUSAN PFANNMULLER/Special to The Star

“We need to make sure that we not only maintain the neighborhoods but sustain the neighborhoods,” said Edwin Birch, a resident of Zion Estates in northeast Kansas City, Kan. “And to do our part to beautify the neighborhood.”

A look back at future of city core

New homes help draw people back

By AUSTIN BELL

Special to The Star

Carol Marinovich isn't given to strolls through cornfields or listening to disembodied voices suggest that “If you build it, they will come....”

But long before she was elected mayor, Marinovich had a vision for making Kansas City, Kan., a better place to live. And that meant, at some level, making it a more attractive place to live.

That vision, and some development money, helped launch Pala Vista, the walled subdivision off of Seventh Street and Central Avenue. Not long afterward, community development groups formed and churches began pushing forward on projects like the Turtle Hill redevelopment, Zion Estates in the city's northeast corner, and, more recently, projects on Strawberry Hill and Cathedral Point.

A decade later, Marinovich thinks it's working.

“I think what PalaVista showed was that people would buy new homes in the older parts of our community,” says Marinovich. Pala Vista, she notes, “was the first new housing east of I-635 in 30 years.”

And it wouldn't be the last.

City officials, developers and residents alike have come to acknowledge that clean, safe neighborhoods are imperative for a healthy, livable city. If the city and its developers can achieve some kind of critical mass with that new growth, the thinking went, it could create impetus for other developers and homeowners to pour additional resources into revitalizing the city's core.

But before it could start, someone had to take a chance.

“The advice I was given back then was: ‘Don't do it. It will be your political demise,’ but I didn't believe them, and they were wrong,” Marinovich says. “If other communities can build houses within the urban core, then so can we, and we can make it work.

“Back then we had no community development corporation, and now we have several. And interestingly enough, many of them are faith-based, so the faith community has really stepped up to the plate. I believe Pala Vista was the spark for that to happen.”

Another pioneer in the urban development effort in Wyandotte County was the Rev. C.L. Bachus of Mt. Zion Baptist.

“The church here began purchasing property around the church that was run down,” he said. “Then in 1992, we built an upscale duplex which was probably the first new property built in that area in 50 years, and that started sort of a renaissance.

“People would see the well-groomed lawn with a nice brick structure on it. They saw what the rest of the neighborhood could look like. The rest of the area was pretty run down. We partnered up with Habitat for Humanity to build five houses in the neighborhood, too. In the first phase of them, they were sold as fast as they could build them,” he said.

Thus was born what is now known as Zion Estates.

Those were the kinds of sparks Marinovich hoped for back in 1990. Since then, groups like CityVision Ministries and Community Housing of Wyandotte County have sprung up, building new, affordable homes and offering loan-assistance to families in need.

Dozens of new homes in the urban core have been added, and other older homes refinished. Turtle Hill is an effort of City Vision, a faith-based community development corporation in its 12th year. John Harvey, president and founder of CityVision, said Turtle Hill had made an impact on the rest of the community.

“Turtle Hill was a combination of renovated turn-of-the-century homes and new homes and townhomes. The key thing for us is that we're producing a lasting change in a neighborhood. If you drive through the Turtle Hill neighborhood redevelopment area, those people are taking care of the homes, those people are building up equity, and it's a lasting asset for the neighborhood.

“We're aiming for long-term sustainable change. Part of that is also developing the leadership base in the neighborhood. Turtle Hill is an incredible example of that. Many of the new families are managing their own neighborhood. They're working together. They do children's programs. That's the kind of sustainable change we want to leave behind,” he said.

Evelyn Hudson, resident of Turtle Hill and president of Turtle Hill Neighborhood Association, attests to the need for active citizen groups in these communities.

The neighborhood association, she says, is “pretty aggressive as far as interacting with codes, so if we see neighbors who are violating codes, were active in contacting codes.”

“We make sure the properties are clean. We have access to grants to help neighbors with small maintenance issues on the property.”

Did redevelopment of the area influence her decision to move to Turtle Hill in 2000?

“Definitely, in my case. We moved from out west into the urban core area of Kansas City, Kan. I appreciate what was done with the neighborhood. When I saw the homes, and I saw how people were taking care of their property, I had a strong interest in moving here,” she said.

Speaking about their new urban development, residents of Zion Estates are, for the most part, pleased. A resident there for six years, Edwin Birch believes the development was a great idea, but he'd like to see it moving more quickly toward completion.

“When the building first started, there was so much excitement, but the fire sort of died out the longer they took to build the neighborhood,” Birch said. “Hopefully that fire can get sparked again.

“Projects like Zion Estates are very important for the urban community,” he said. “The residents here, at Turtle Hill and the other new areas, we need to make sure that we not only maintain the neighborhoods but sustain the neighborhoods. And to do our part to beautify the neighborhood.

“We have to do our part,” he said, “to continue the growth that has taken place.”

First glance

- More than a decade after city officials and developers began to push for new housing in 0 eastern Kansas City, Kan., scores of homes have been built, drawing people into the city's core.
- City officials, developers and residents alike have come to acknowledge that clean, safe neighborhoods are imperative for a healthy, livable city. One goal of the new-housing initiative is to create impetus for other developers and homeowners to pour additional resources into revitalizing the city's core.

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