

Revitalization efforts bring life to historic areas, outer edges of storied neighborhoods

by Michelle Leach

Formerly, when one mentioned a notable destination for all things housing, shopping, working, and entertainment, the “usual suspects” (the Old Market) came to mind; today, a multitude of new and emerging destinations have changed the narrative.

“We are a smaller development shop, but we had big dreams and aspirations to be able to buy this piece of land on the outskirts of Aksarben Village,”



Spellman

said Ryan Spellman of J Development Co. “We saw the potential for future job growth.”

Two and a half years later, Centerline Apartments at 7007 Oak St. is 98% leased; the firm anticipated the Creighton University Medical Center relocation from downtown to the Bergan Mercy campus. In turn, health care workers represent a large percentage of residents.

“The next wave of growth for Aksarben is related to UNO and the growth of its campus and enrollment,” he said; specifically, growth



Holly Barrett, executive director, Omaha Downtown Improvement District.

south of Center Street with projects such as the new baseball and softball complex.

“The former CoCo Key/Ramada Inn has

tremendous potential for redevelopment,” he said. “It’s right off of Interstate 80 on 72nd St. and is a great opportunity to start from scratch.”

Spellman referenced the development of an “Aksarben Village South” or “Phase No. 2.”

“I am a huge advocate for density, having retail with housing above and getting as much



Kline



Andrews

bang for your buck with the land you’re working with,” Spellman said.

Instead of concentrating on one area, multiple districts and pockets that pop up throughout the region advance the importance of transportation, easing travel to different areas.

“I have never been a fan of ‘westward expansion,’” he said. “Soon enough, we’ll find ourselves in Grand Island. The city planning department has been fantastic in the encouragement of density and urban infill-types of developments.”

Executive Director Holly Barrett’s Omaha Downtown Improvement District spans 75 blocks, and includes the convention center, Old Market, Central Business District, and Riverfront and Capitol districts.

“We have so many fabulous emerging neighborhoods on the edge of our district,” she said. “We’ve got Little Italy and Little Bohemia on our south end, the neighborhood between Midtown and downtown on the west end, all of the potential of North Downtown and the Makerhood.”

The Capitol District has brought new life to the convention center corner, she said, while the

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Riverfront and Conagra campus projects are spurring things into high gear in the Old Market.

“Up in the Central Business District, where things move a little bit slower sometimes, we have tremendous potential at the World Herald and Civic Center auditorium sites and, while it’s frustrating to see it like fallow, we are thrilled the city is taking it so seriously and working on finding exactly the right tenant,” Barrett

said, adding they hope that includes a big-box grocery store.

She said ODID looks forward to working with philanthropy organizations to help grow its foundation, allowing for projects such as public art installations, and seating, sidewalk and lighting improvements. It is also the lead stakeholders in the Old Market-wide alley revitalization project, assisting properties in dumpster consolidation and safety, beautification, and potential economic development projects

at their back doors.

Vice President of Development Jay Kline emphasized White Lotus Group’s HUB 1401 and NoDo projects at 11th and Nicholas streets; the former is described as a “mission-driven nonprofit center designed around collaboration and innovation,” while the latter builds upon the “legacy of past neighborhood residents, skilled craftsmen, while being a gateway to Omaha.”

He referred to HUB’s unique co-lab environment; through collaboration and shared services, philanthropic efforts are maximized by avoiding overlap and redundant expenses. Filled with public art from all types of makers, the NoDo project area highlights modern architecture amid historic charm.

“We believe that our concept — combining local retailers and amenities, multi-family apartments and office users — will help kickstart the New North Makerhood’s ability to thrive for many years to come,” he said.

Kline mentioned the following as positively impacting NoDo: Future Forward’s revitalization efforts on the New North Makerhood; refined plans led by Paul G Smith Associates on the Millwork District; the expansion of the Builder’s District south of Cuming Street (notably, the Kiewit headquarters relocation); the Downtown Riverfront Trust’s efforts to revitalize Lewis and Clark Landing; and continued support from the city.

Such districts fit significantly into Omaha’s overall landscape; for instance, he noted how less than 15 years ago, Maple Street in Benson was “sleepy,” with a small handful of places breathing life into the area.

“What has happened since then is nothing short of incredible,” he said of organic reinvestment. “The up-and-coming neighborhoods in NoDo ... they have quietly been a place for art and other creatives for many years, but the growth in the area due to proximity to TD Ameritrade Park

and the CHI Health Center, along with the redevelopment plans for the Riverfront, are shining a bright light on the potential of this area.”

Millwork Commons was top of mind for Restoration Exchange Omaha President Adam Andrews; Flywheel’s slated move to the Ashton Building this summer is the first of many planned projects for the neighborhood, which is named after former warehouse users (such as the Adams and Kelly Millwork Co.) that made windows, doors and other building components.

“The existing historic district is the same size and age as our Old Market, which is a favorite locale of everyone’s,” Andrews said. “So, it has the same potential to provide a glimpse into Omaha’s past while being a part of its present and future.”

With the envisioned commercial, retail, residential and other districtwide amenities, Andrews said Millwork Commons is set to make a great first impression on travelers flying into Eppley Airfield.

Andrews also mentioned the Blackstone Hotel’s renovation into the Cottonwood Hotel as the “crown jewel” in the Blackstone District’s noteworthy revitalization.

“It will be one of only a few historic hotels operating in the city and bring back to life a fabled part of Omaha’s past while contributing greatly to the life and vitality of the neighborhood,” he said.

“Livability” endures.

“The post-war boom of the suburbs had such a detrimental effect on urban life and historic neighborhoods that, in some cases, their revitalization has only come about in the last 10 or 15 years,” he said. “Historic neighborhoods were traditionally denser, more diverse, offered a variety of living styles, amenities and services. On top of all those things, they have character and interest with a variety of architectural styles, residents and building types. All these factors combine to make places that people gravitate towards and want to live, work and play in.”