

This is the next in a series of weekly articles focused on individual visions for the economic future of North Omaha. Each article will feature the comments of a North Omaha Development Project steering committee member.

Learn more about the project and provide additional input at the next meeting on July 19 at Omaha North High Magnet School, 4410 North 36th St. The meeting will begin at 6 p.m. in the Viking Center. An ADA accessible entrance is located at the northeast music hall door.

Long-time Resident, Brenda Council, Offers Unique Perspective on North Omaha Development Project

As a long-time resident of North Omaha, Brenda Council has a unique perspective on the gradual decline in economic vitality she has seen in her community. She also possesses first-hand observation of the affects of that economic drain over time.

“In order for this community to thrive, we have to have an economic foundation,” Council said. “Looking at everything that’s going on around us, the first question you have to ask is ‘why isn’t it happening here?’” She pointed to the growing economic climate of the greater metropolitan area, and sited significant commercial and retail development currently under way. “Why can’t it occur in North Omaha?” she queried, “Why do I have to leave the community I live in to get basic products and services? That has to be addressed.”

Council comes to the North Omaha Development Project (NODP) steering committee with a well-rounded background in social governance, education, law, business and local politics. The fact that her roots run deep in the North Omaha community is certainly an added benefit and qualifying factor. When the opportunity to serve on the steering committee was made available, she felt it was only natural to become involved and hoped that this would be the project that actually bore fruit.

“What distinguishes this initiative from previous initiatives,” she said, “quite frankly boils down to financial support. There has been a committed infusion of money on the front end of this project – paying for the consulting staff as well as money already raised and dedicated to the implementation phase. That was absent in a lot of the previous studies,” Council said. “The resources are ready and available to implement the results of the study.”

Another distinguishing factor is the steering committee. There was never a steering committee behind the previous studies. “As you look at the composition of the current committee, you see a group that is extremely diverse in its representation. And many of the members have the resources needed to make this effort successful,” she added.

But no less vital is the need for wide support from the Greater Omaha community. “In my opinion the reason that we haven't seen economic growth occur in North Omaha is in large part due to the fact that the broader community has not seen the value of investing economically in North Omaha.”

Council views the involvement of representatives from across the community as yet another distinction between previous initiatives and this effort. “I think the reality has been a long time coming, and I have said this in the past with regard to the conditions in North Omaha,” she added. “I liken it to cancer. The body cannot be healthy if there's cancer in any part of it. Take that same analogy to the city, the city cannot continue to truly grow if one of its segments is ignored. Ultimately, the 'cancer' affects the overall good.”

The question to be asked is, why has it taken so long for the majority community to recognize this basic principle for maintaining a healthy and whole city? Especially, she said, when you get the kind of adverse publicity as the recently released local and national poverty statistics. “I believe it's incumbent upon the greater community to come together to address that problem. This has to be a partnership, and the greater community has to defer in many respects to the interests of the (minority) community.”

There have been and will continue to be open forums where public input is solicited and considered. “I think you can see the level of confidence shared by the steering committee. It demonstrates that they're taking into account the community's opinion about what needs to happen here in North Omaha economically. And I trust that the next public meeting, scheduled for July 19, will be bursting at the seams with community residents who want to have input and involvement in the future of their community.”

What Council finds most encouraging about this NODP steering committee is its general make-up of North Omaha residents and business owners. In previous initiatives, she said, they have not been present to offer their valuable input. “We have representatives of the financial community. We have state, local and federal representation. So in terms of the intellectual and capital resources coming together, I think it's unprecedented.”

One of the misconceptions that needs to be corrected is that there is no capital available in our community, she said. “There is capital within our community and what we need to do is leverage that with the capital that is available through the more affluent majority.” We have to resist the inclination to avoid risk and be willing to take on some of these financial challenges.

“If we want to have control over what occurs,” she added, “we have to put up (financing) as well, because I don't think it helps the community in the long run if all the resources come from outside. There's no ownership, there's no sense of control. We need to take advantage of the opportunity to leverage our resources with the resources that are being made available.”

Council sees this as a great opportunity for entrepreneurs in North Omaha who have business ideas and have created business plans, but possess minimal capital and need more to make their venture a reality.

It is still true that most small businesses, whether they are majority-owned or minority-owned, fail due to the lack of planning. “You can have the best product in the world. But if you don't know how to market it, and if you don't know how to account for your revenue and expenditures, you're headed down a path to failure,” she said. “Through this effort, there will be links to existing resources like the Nebraska Business Development Center, Metropolitan Community College, and other community-based organizations that currently offer business planning and entrepreneurship programs.”

Veteran or potential entrepreneurs need to take advantage of the available resources and be prepared to start, build or expand their business as a part of this initiative.

Council maintains a clear and long-standing vision of a vibrant community – one where North Omaha residents have the freedom to venture outside their surroundings by choice, not by necessity. She envisions 24th and Lake streets becoming one of the hubs of economic activity again – a viable corridor that many like herself grew up in and remember with affection.

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