

North Omaha Development Project

(This is the next in a series of articles focused on individual visions for the economic future of North Omaha. This week we feature the comments of committee member Chris Rodgers).

Originally from East St. Louis, Ill., Rodgers came to Omaha on a sports scholarship and decided to take employment here. Back home, people wondered if he would be able to find work that would cover the costs he accumulated while in college. Rodgers has since become a Douglas County Commissioner and a community development leader at First National Bank in Omaha.

MOTIVATION:

Wanting to have a long-term effect on the economic welfare of the third district compelled Rodgers to join the North Omaha Development Project (NODP). “If this goes right,” he said, “we could have the opportunity to increase the black middle class in Omaha.”

FOR BETTER OR WORSE:

As a representative of the district, he has encountered a sufficient number of people to gain a clear understanding of the changes that North Omaha has gone through over the years.

“When Sibyl Myers was deeply engaged in the Dreamland project, I had conversations with her and read her publications,” Rodgers said. Myers was an accomplished journalist and artist-in-residence with the Nebraska Arts Council. Before her untimely death in January 2007, she founded the Dreamland project in an effort to record the rich history of North Omaha.

“The main thing is, even though I didn't actually see what North Omaha was like in the past, I have a clear vision of what it could be.” But substantial investments must be made in order to affect lasting change, the commissioner said.

“I came from a town that had no affluent black areas,” Rodgers recalled. During his years growing up, East St. Louis was commonly referred to as the ‘brokest’ city in America – a city, according to Rodgers, that was majority black.

So, although he wasn’t a first-hand witness of North Omaha in its heyday, he can certainly relate to a disenfranchised social/economic environment. “I’ve been told about it,” he said. “I’ve read about it. And I know that we are nowhere near what East St. Louis is. We need to take some steps to make sure we don’t even come close to having that here in North Omaha.”

KEYS:

From a financial point of view, Rodgers stressed the need for a strong long-term, market-driven plan – something that can be sustainable over time.

“There will literally be millions of dollars in business opportunities,” he said. “As a county board member, and now a steering committee member for the NODP, I want to make sure that this project not only presents new business and job opportunities for those in North Omaha – but also opportunities for businesses that are already there.”

When programs like the NODP employ a mutually beneficial system, businesses are in a position to hire in greater numbers and make a more significant impact on the local economy. Ideally, Rodgers said, it will also spawn increased entrepreneurship. Those factors would certainly constitute a win-win scenario.

BRIDGING THE GAP:

In order to realize an equitable economic climate for the North Omaha community, two things must occur, according to Commissioner Rodgers, there needs to be a heightened interest in area, and the *timing* needs to be right. A great idea is just that, until its time has come. “Even though studies have been done in the past,” Rogers said, “hopefully the timing is right for this development project.”

His focus is on what he sees as *purposeful intent*. And as far as he can tell, this is the first time that a project like the NODP has been able to gather financial support up front.

“This project has dedicated and committed leadership in the form of Omaha’s mayor, who really wants to get things done and who is willing to do whatever it takes.” Rogers said that the unfortunate circumstances of the past in no way alter the fact that we may now have the political will and leverage to see the NODP through successfully.

So, now that dedicated leadership is in place, Rodgers said that the overall environment lends itself to success. “We have to get this one right,” he added. “I don't think we can afford to fail this time out. It's critical that we get it done and have things in place in order to make it happen.”

PUBLIC FORUMS:

Truth told, those responsible for making things happen are almost always found at a grassroots level. And by Rodgers’ estimation, the average person matters a lot. “One of the things that we have to get right within the steering committee is to make sure that the average person has input, and that we’re in communication with them as much as possible. We need to make sure that the spirit of what the people want is there.”

Progress free of impediment is not likely. There are a couple matters that Rogers has heard North Omaha residents comment on that he plans to pay attention to those::

- 1) They want to enjoy the investments being made in their community. They don't want to feel like once it's all said and done, that there's not going to be a place for them to live in that area.

- 2) They also want to make sure that the benefits are shared equally – not a case where others are thoughtlessly taking advantage of their community without giving back.

There is a genuine need to ensure that members of the community enjoy long-term employment opportunities. Rogers predicts a great deal of infrastructure work will be

associated with the NODP. “The city as a whole is lacking skilled trade workers. Now we have an opportunity to train people in the third district and have them in a position to make things better for their families for years to come. Those are the types of things we need to be working towards.”

###