

**Planning Director Applauds
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 Steve Jensen).

When it comes to the city's new and redevelopment projects, the Omaha Planning Department is a fairly visible entity, covering a lot of ground – literally. The three main divisions within the department include:

- 1) Urban Planning: Responsible for preparing and maintaining the City's Master Plan, guiding the growth and development of the city, capital improvement programming for annexation, as well as implementation of the Master Plan through the zoning code and other subdivision ordinances.

- 2) Housing and Community Development: Responsible for handling the City's Community Development Block Grant Program and use of those funds. Its primary focus is redevelopment activities in older neighborhoods and distressed areas of the city, along with housing rehabilitation, help with financing for people who are buying homes, redevelopment and revitalization projects, working together with nonprofit organizations, OHA and others to provide quality affordable housing throughout the city.

- 3) Permits and Inspections: Responsible for all of the permits for building, vending, signage and temporary use of buildings.

The work of these busy divisions falls under the Omaha Planning Department and the leadership of one man – Steve Jensen.

“Many years ago, this department was actually two separate departments,” he said. “There was a planning department, which was responsible for what's now the urban planning division.” There were two other divisions that came under the oversight of the

housing department. “It was a lot for one director to keep track of. But, there was a constant need for coordination – for making sure that what was being proposed in the comprehensive Master Plan was being carried out throughout the various divisions.”

By merging the two departments it brought all related activities under one roof and under one director, further enhancing coordination between divisions. “That part was good,” Jensen admits. “But it is a lot for one director to keep tabs on. You have to rely pretty heavily on the people in charge of those divisions to operate independently.”

However, independence is not an option with regard to the city’s overall growth objectives, or Master Plan, said Jensen. “A portion of our Master Plan calls for the city to create a series of neighborhood alliance district plans,” he added. “The first of those plans really was an effort that was started by the Chamber with the Destination Midtown effort. The second was the Benson/Ames Alliance plan –our department is very involved with both.”

The North Omaha Development Project (NODP), according to Jensen, is essentially the third in what will eventually be more than a dozen neighborhood alliance plans that would be created across the city. “Being involved in the North Omaha planning effort was something we definitely wanted and needed to be a part of,” he added. “It’s something that we see as a real opportunity to bring everybody together and work on a plan for North Omaha.”

But the planning official views the NODP as not just another plan, but as an opportunity to take decisive action to accomplish a worthwhile goal – a chance to get everyone reading from the same page – pulling in the same direction in order to make great things happen in North Omaha. “We applaud the Chamber for taking on this task,” Jensen said. “But it’s also something that we absolutely want to be a partner in.”

To ensure that the NODP results in a positive direction for the future, Jensen insists that the project needs to become part of the City's Master Plan – just as the Destination

Midtown and the Benson/Ames plans have been incorporated. “What we [the Omaha Planning Department] will do at the end of this effort,” he said, “is take the plan through the Omaha Planning Board and City Council and have it adopted as part of our Master Plan.”

By way of example, Jensen suggested that Omaha’s Charter dictates that before the city can expend any capital dollars on public improvement, those improvements must be listed as part of the capital improvement program. Each year the planning department prepares an updated six-year capital improvement program.

“The reason that program is in the hands of the planning department is because it is needed to carry out the Master Plan,” he added. “Let's say that as we look at the North Omaha plan, it involves enhancements at the 30th and Ames streets area – helping make good things happen at that intersection. Let's say that there are some street improvements that need to be done.”

Technically speaking, if portions of the NODP were completed without first being made a part of the City's Master Plan, it may not be possible to incorporate it into the capital improvement program to acquire assistance in making those improvements. “If it is part of the City's Master Plan then we can say this is something the city needs to do because it supports the Master Plan. Therefore it's okay to put it into our capital improvement program and ultimately into the budget to make the improvements.”

The planning department has responsibility for developing and maintaining the City’s Master Plan – an overall representation of the vision of Omaha. The two primary purposes of the plan are to provide a legal foundation for regulating land use in areas of zoning and subdivision control and to present a unified direction for the vision of residents with specific steps for achievement. A 50-member citizen task force is appointed to guide the creation and implementation of that plan. “We are happy to be a

part of the NODP,” Jensen said, “to bring it to conclusion while making it a component of the city’s Master Plan.”

To gauge the potential for success of this effort, Jensen recommends taking a step back and looking at prevailing circumstances and how the city was gradually developing over the years. Then consider how that overall development pattern impacted neighborhoods like North Omaha.

Fast-forward to today, Jensen said, and look at the present conditions to determine how North Omaha fits into the puzzle now. “If you look back between 1960 and 1990, I think we lost about a third of the housing units in North Omaha,” he estimated. “We also lost a lot of housing in South Omaha and many of the other neighborhoods to the west of downtown.” It is not without significance that adjacent areas were struggling as well, and that those conditions may have been detrimental to past planning efforts in North Omaha.

According to Jensen, there was also a thrust during that time frame – a big suburban thrust in the city – one that has and continues to occur across the country. “People depopulated older neighborhoods of cities. That trend certainly hurt older neighborhoods in all cities,” he said. “But in Omaha, particularly North Omaha, when you combine that general trend of movement into the suburbs with things like the North Freeway and other things that occurred in the North Omaha community, it accelerated the loss of housing and population in the immediate area.”

Furthermore, Jensen noted decisions made at the city, state, county and even federal level that also accelerated the economic decline in North Omaha.

As time went on, people across the country started seeing older neighborhoods being redeveloped. “In fact, in much of the planning that is done for new development these days, people look at how soundly older neighborhoods were developed in the 1900s and 1920s, and realize that that pattern of development was a good one.”

There is also the critical infrastructure that the city owns and maintains in older neighborhoods. “Whether there are ten people or just one person living on a block, you’re still plowing the streets, maintaining the sewers,” he added, “you’re still taking care of the parks and you underutilize the infrastructure that was built to serve a larger population.”

Jensen pointed to the current broad national trend where people are rediscovering the advantages of living in older neighborhoods closer to downtowns. “You have access to jobs, entertainment facilities and so forth,” he said. “We’re seeing a general tendency across the nation to move back towards downtown.”

Over the last 30 years, evidence that areas around North Omaha are getting stronger can be seen in improvements made downtown, along the riverfront, the airport business park, in Benson, North 72nd Street and 72nd Street and Ames Avenue. “I think that provides a real solid niche for North Omaha to build on,” Jensen said. “People have realized that we really have to bring all of our resources to bear and work together. We have to look for ways to bring North Omaha the same regeneration and revitalization that has come to many of the older neighborhoods in the city.”

What gives the planning director hope is the concerted and cooperative effort he sees. “From the business community through political leadership, to the person on the street,” Jensen said, “we’re realizing that if we do this together – if we work together we can do some great things in North Omaha.. That's what gives me the most encouragement about this effort. There are a lot of folks with great ideas. That’s the other thing, anytime you look for success in an effort like this, you’ve got to get everybody excited about it. That's when great ideas flow, and that's when everybody really gets on board. Then great things happen.”

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