

This is the next in a series of weekly articles focused on individual visions for the economic future of North Omaha. This week we feature the comments of committee member Thomas Warren, Chief of the Omaha Police Department and an Omaha native.

Omaha Police Chief Has Personal Interest in North Omaha Development Project

“I was born and raised in North Omaha. My family and my friends reside there. So I have a personal interest in the North Omaha Development Project.” Those are the words of Thomas Warren, Omaha’s police chief. He has spent a considerable amount of his professional career working in North Omaha, first as a commander in the northeast precinct, and now in his role as head of the Omaha Police Department.

Warren is well acquainted with the daunting responsibility of providing a safe, secure environment for not only the residents of the near north side, but also a burgeoning metropolitan city of about 420,000 people. He has both a personal and professional interest in the welfare of his community. So when Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce President and CEO David Brown approached Warren about participating on the North Omaha Development Project (NODP) steering committee, the decision was a simple one to make.

“Certainly I recognize the relationship between law enforcement and economic development, and how important it is for potential entrepreneurs to feel comfortable in investing in the community,” Warren said. “Because they want to know that the area is safe and that their investments will be safe.” Therefore his interest in wanting to see this community thrive and prosper motivates Warren to take an active part on the new committee. “I also recognize that this is a tremendous opportunity. And unlike in the past, when many of the initiatives may have had very well intentioned individuals involved, they may also have lacked other important components like funding to ensure the proposals were properly implemented.”

Warren sees the new study as having all the necessary elements to make it a successful endeavor. “In my role as chief of police I have found David Brown to be a very engaging individual. I think he is extremely sincere in terms of his desire to see this project flourish and this area prosper,” Warren said. “Obviously he has a business

interest in promoting economic development throughout the city of Omaha.” And that includes North Omaha.

The chief has found Brown to be a man sincere in his relationships, forthright and candid. “We’ve had the kinds of discussions where sensitive issues were discussed, particularly as it pertains to law enforcement, crime and the perceptions of North Omaha.” Warren insists that the findings of recent studies will provide a more accurate assessment of the overall crime rate for the city of Omaha.

“The reality [versus the common perception] is that North Omaha doesn’t have any more crime than other parts of the city,” he said. “In fact, in terms of actual volume, we probably have fewer incidents of serious offenses on the north side.” But because of misconceptions often perpetuated by inaccurate media portrayal, crime appears to be concentrated in the North Omaha area. “You would think that it’s a very dangerous community,” he said, “when in fact, we have fewer incidents by volume.”

It is an unfortunate fact that mass media often exercises great influence over the way images are created and in the portrayal of important social issues to the general public. “It has been due to the media coverage of certain stories,” Warren said, “that one gets the impression that these incidents (of crime and violence) are ongoing, and that they are related. The truth is you may have a few – and I will describe them as spectacular – in the sense that if it’s a shooting or a homicide, it would generate a tremendous amount of media interest, as it should.”

However, according to actual records, these incidents are typically few and far between, he said. And these incidents may be motivated by a personal dispute in contrast to someone being attacked randomly or individuals being harmed. “Without minimizing or being dismissive,” Warren suggested, “certainly, when you talk about crime, it’s unfortunate that you have these spectacular incidents that may lead to a generalization that crime is widespread and occurring on a regular or a daily basis.” The truth is, it may be more a matter of media portrayal than actual incidents.

Hopefully the new studies being conducted will give a more accurate depiction of North Omaha. “And as a result, potential investors will find that it is a safe community and right

for investment.” There is a great deal of untapped potential among the targeted group, and Warren recognizes these strengths in terms of prime real estate and a strong consumer base.

Like others interviewed previously in this series, Warren fondly remembers the bright era of the late '60s and early '70s when 24th and Lake streets were the epicenter for North Omaha. There were grocery and clothing stores, restaurants, retail and entertainment outlets. “As a young adult, I can recall when businesses were prospering,” he said. “Obviously as a result of civil unrest in the late '60s, many of these businesses were destroyed or abandoned, and nothing really came along to replace them. A number of the structures sat vacant or were ultimately excavated. North Omaha never recovered from that experience – at least not from the standpoint of economic development.”

It is also likely that there were political decisions made at the time – decisions which affected funding for community revitalization and urban renewal – where funds were redirected. And so the North Omaha business community was unable to rebound from the devastation of that period of upheaval. “And it's unfortunate because that has obviously led to the predicament that we're in as outlined in a recent Omaha World-Herald newspaper study,” Warren suggested.

“You would never have imagined that a city as prosperous as the city of Omaha – with five Fortune 500 companies – would rank no. 3 in the U.S. with respect to quality of life for African-Americans. Six in ten children living in this community live below the poverty line,” he said sadly. This in spite of the fact that Forbes ranks Omaha as 11th best city for business and careers based on economic and quality of life factors.

That was shocking news for him because he understands that “law enforcement professionals deal with the outward symptoms of economic and social deprivation, they are not the source of it. And when individuals have experienced those conditions, whether it's a lack of work or education, they are more inclined to engage in antisocial behavior.”

Warren sees a clear correlation between education – or the lack thereof – and crime, as well as the relationship between income – or the lack thereof – and poverty to crime. “So, from a law enforcement perspective, we’ve been dealing with the symptoms of this social and economic deprivation, trying to manage the crime rate in this community. And despite the limitations, we’ve done a fairly decent job,” he said. “When you look at Omaha's crime rate compared to other cities our size, you’ll find that this is a relatively safe community [in North Omaha]. For the most part, we don't have any more incidents in north Omaha, than occur in other parts of the city.”

With safety established, he firmly believes that we are poised to take full advantage of an environment ripe for significant progress. But inherent in even the best setting for economic development is the need for an available and skilled workforce to take advantage of employment opportunities.

Pointing to local initiatives like the *Educare of Omaha* and *Winners Circle* currently in existence in Omaha, along with changes in state legislation, Warren is confident that sustained funding will be provided for early childhood education. “It is critical that our kids prepare to learn from the very first day they enroll in our school system.”

And we have to continue to provide positive reinforcement for academic achievement and good citizenship, he said. “So, our kids are being rewarded with incentives to not only do well in school, but to have a good attitude and to show up on time every day, ready to learn. They are encouraged to demonstrate good citizenship even at the middle school level.”

Other programs like *All Our Kids* and *Building Bright Futures* provide special funding for college education for students with greater financial needs. “These projects are all about bridging the gap – making sure that our kids are being trained and educated so that when they become young adults they can be employable,” Warren said.

At a more advanced stage is the Empower Omaha! African-American Empowerment Network, a grassroots effort, according to Warren, that mobilizes the entire North Omaha community with multiple disciplines toward continued collective self-sustainability. “This is an initiative where you have African-Americans taking ownership of their fate,” he said

proudly. “And there has been a very positive enthusiasm generated in the interest of repositioning ourselves, rather than just letting others do it for us.” It is the first time he can recall that so many people are working in concert to do something positive in North Omaha. “Unfortunately, in the past there's been a negative mindset that hindered progress,” Warren added.

“New leadership is now insisting that the commentary remain positive, and that we work together in order to improve conditions and the quality of life for the residents in North Omaha.” So with all these elements, along with the North Omaha Development Project, we have individuals who are willing – and most importantly – able to see improvements made. “We have a very generous philanthropic community in Omaha,” he said. “There are individual investors who are willing to entrust their resources to ensure that things improve, that programs are implemented and projects reach completion.”

Chief Warren acknowledges a very real opportunity for North Omaha to benefit from current initiatives. “I am optimistic that there could be a revitalization of this community. But we first have to change the mindset on an individual level – to convince our youths that there are wonderful opportunities available if they choose to take advantage of them. When we make the necessary sacrifices and commitments, then the reward will be there,” he said. “If we work hard, good things will come with these opportunities.” The North Omaha community will certainly prosper again, according to Warren. The family structure, he said, will be restored, and housing conditions will also improve.

It is his hope that individuals serving on the North Omaha Development Project steering committee and in all community leadership roles will maintain the vision and drive required to see this important project through to its gainful resolve. “Whether it's political leadership, community leaders or leaders of the household,” Warren added, “we must get behind this project with our energy and ideas, our knowledge and our money.” It's up to us to make the commitment to see that this project is successful. “It is imperative that we decide to empower ourselves and insist that this community become self-sufficient and thriving. That way our children will have reasonable aspirations and opportunities for a bright future.”