

## **New Focus Puts North Omaha Development Front And Center**

With nearly 46,000 people, spending an estimated \$57.8 million in retail in 2006, North Omaha represents one of the area's greatest opportunities for development.

"It's an underserved market," said Winsley Durand, director of minority economic development for the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce. "There is a great deal of demand for goods and services, but few providers. As a result, millions of dollars are spent outside the area that could be spent right here – creating commerce and jobs."

In fact, it's reached such proportions that national retailers are starting to take notice — especially with North Omaha's proximity to the city's thriving downtown business district, the airport and Qwest Center Omaha. This is precisely why the Chamber is rallying its resources to make the case for development among local minority-owned businesses and national firms as well.

"Before, there was the race for the suburbs, but there is so much saturation that businesses are seeking other opportunities for economic growth and expansion. What they're now realizing is there is tremendous buying power within the urban population," Durand said.

It's the result of the area's density of income. This refers to the fact that even though individual household incomes may not be as great as those in suburban areas, together North Omaha has become a powerful purchasing block. It's an opportunity that Durand, the Chamber and the City of Omaha are not allowing to slip by. Leading the charges is the Chamber's Minority Economic Development Council (MEDC).

For several years, the MEDC and the Chamber have been actively pursuing national retail chains for expansion in Omaha. Membership in the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC) has proven advantageous. The ICSC is the global trade association of the shopping center industry.

Durand and his team have been successful in developing relationships with groups that have abundant resources and that are interested in the betterment of the community. One such national group is 100 Black Men of America, Inc., a group committed to the intellectual development of youth and the economic empowerment of the African American community. The national organization has chapters in cities across the country.

Even in cases where developers and retailers come from outside Omaha, Durand expects work to be performed by local minority-owned subcontractors and subsequently staffed by professionals and employees from right here in North Omaha.

More specifically, Durand and his team are interested in attracting local minority firms to the area and enabling existing businesses to grow and expand in the area.

"We are all about job creation and creating more minority-owned businesses," he said. "Ideally, this will come from within this community."

This means providing minority businesses with incentives that encourage development. Two key state initiatives, which are open to all qualifying businesses, the Nebraska Advantage and customized job training programs, are designed specifically to spur economic development.

What's more, regardless of where a business is in its own development and growth, it can access the resources it needs through the Minority Economic Development Council and the Chamber.

“We want people to see the Chamber as their portal to all business development services – whether or not they are members of the Chamber,” said Durand. “We have the people and programs in place to assist with financing, employee attraction and training, site selection and development, or any other business services they may need.”

For additional information, contact Winsley Durand, director of minority economic development at (402) 233-7143.