

New investments slowly add up in Kansas City's urban core

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Drive, bike or walk the neighborhoods east of Troost Avenue, and the picture of the City of Fountains looks bleak.

But not to John A. Wood. He admits he's a glass-half-full kind of guy. Wood took me on a tour of the area from 18th to 47th streets and Troost to Prospect avenues. On the more than one-hour drive, a different view of the urban core emerged.

It's one of hope powered by more than \$130 million in investments. The problem is the area is so big and the deterioration has gone on so long — worsening during the Great Recession — that it will take a lot more money to yield a substantial change.

"We've got to look at the positive things going on," said Wood, assistant city manager/director of the Neighborhoods and Housing Services Department. This should be a hot topic during Black History Month.

We drove south on Troost Avenue. Wood's focus is on people who never left the area and making conditions better for them while attracting younger, mixed-income people back into homes and businesses.

But it takes time. We drove over to Van Brunt Boulevard and then south past the VA Hospital to the St. Michael's Project, a new 158-unit center for homeless veterans.

The construction is impressive, but it weighs against hundreds of vacant lots, boarded up foreclosed homes and empty businesses. Wood isn't oblivious to it.

He said Kansas City has 1,200 dangerous buildings, and a disproportionate share are in the 3rd District. It'd take \$7,500 on average to raze each dangerous structure. That's \$9 million in tear down costs.

An added wrinkle is many abandoned or foreclosed properties have title and ownership problems going back generations. City officials have to sort that out before redevelopment can occur. Yet a reinvestment is taking place, albeit slowly. We drove by the Seven Oaks Shopping Center.

The plan is to remove dangerous buildings, renovate existing structures and complete the Seven Oaks, Oak Point and St. Michael's redevelopment projects. We drove to Prospect Avenue and 39th Street, the site of a new grocery store.

We headed east and north past what had been an eyesore off Bruce R. Watkins Drive — the old Horace Mann Elementary School. It's gone now, and new housing using the old brick from the school is planned for the Ivanhoe site.

Wood said city officials have negotiated with Bank of America to acquire 75 pieces of property over a two-year period. The bank will give the city \$7,500 each for up to 50 of the houses that need to be razed and \$20,000 each for up to 25 houses that can be rehabilitated.

We drove by the old Bancroft School, now a \$14 million project that will include about 50 housing units. "You've got to be positive about these things," Wood said.

Positives certainly are needed for the mostly abandoned Linwood Shopping Center. Wood said studies will determine what grocery store as an anchor would work best there and what other mixed-used businesses could profit in the community.

To the north, the Kansas City Police Department is building its \$75 million East Patrol Division and crime lab. Nearby the Rev. John “Modest” Miles, pastor of Morning Star Missionary Baptist Church, is planning a multimillion-dollar family center. “The opportunity is here to do that kind of thing,” Wood said.

We drove near Lincoln Academy where new housing is planned. “What we’re trying to do is create a community,” he said.

We headed to Beacon Hill. The University of Missouri-Kansas City is adding housing on Troost Avenue near Truman Medical Center for students and health care workers. Private investors are building homes valued at more than \$300,000 near Watkins Drive with a view of downtown’s skyline.

The investment is attracting new residents and collapsing the city’s longstanding racial divide. In 10 years more people may weigh moving into the urban core than out.