

## On the boulevard

### Residents, business owners want all of MacArthur to shine again

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About three dozen business owners, city officials, police officers and residents gathered at 7:30 a.m. over coffee and pastries to discuss contrasting images of MacArthur Boulevard - one of longtime family businesses and quaint neighborhoods, the other dominated by vacant buildings, debris-strewn lots and problems with crime.

For longtime residents and business owners in the newly formed MacArthur Boulevard Business Association, there's some truth to both.

It only was the second formal meeting of association members, held Thursday at the American Red Cross headquarters on Outer Park Drive. Officers were elected, committees formed and another meeting set for Feb. 8.

But members also expressed a sense of urgency, especially with work about to begin this spring on a MacArthur Boulevard extension project that will link the south end of the boulevard to Interstate 72 by the end of 2009.

"We want this area to be a real centerpiece," said Richard Judd, in expressing the general sentiment that the tale of two MacArthurs could go either way, depending on business and neighborhood response.

Judd, a professor of business administration at the University of Illinois at Springfield and a longtime resident of the area, said he is encouraged that MacArthur Boulevard has its own association.

But he said plans for preserving the best of the boulevard, and improving the worst, must be realistic.

"I don't know how many times I've heard in this neighborhood that a grocery store would be great, but it won't go unless it's a specialty store," said Judd, explaining that the major supermarket chains would no longer find enough space along MacArthur.

The area has been without a neighborhood supermarket since Schnucks closed its store in Town & Country Shopping Center in 1996. A specialty grocery store was part of a 2005 plan to redevelop the site of the old Esquire theater at MacArthur and South Grand Avenue, but that

project fell through.

Consistent signage. Green space, landscaping and decorative streetlights. MacArthur Boulevard brochures and logos. Repair sidewalks and curbs. Clean up litter. Fill in vacancies. Maybe set up a police department annex.

Special committees have been organized to consider each of these areas. But discussions at the latest meeting often returned to the former Kmart building as a high-profile example of the problems facing the corridor.

An out-of-town investment group bought the building at 2115 S. MacArthur Blvd. after the store closed in early 2003. Other than the occasional temporary sale, the building has remained vacant.

One participant described it simply as a "tremendous eyesore," especially the scratched and fading Kmart sign that fronts the boulevard.

Former mayor Mike Houston, president of Town & Country Bank, said small, individually owned businesses, including franchise operations, offer the best hope for filling in vacancies along the boulevard. But he said that requires preserving surrounding neighborhoods.

"We want to keep the rooftops in this area. It's what keeps MacArthur viable. We have to be very concerned about what's happening in the neighborhoods," he said.

Examples also were offered of commercial developments that have rebounded, including Town & Country Shopping Center, one of the city's oldest retail centers.

Association members pointed out that nearly a decade after a local ownership group purchased the center from a Maryland real-estate investment trust, the center is thriving and has even expanded.

Glenn Yanow has operated a Baskin Robbins ice-cream shop on MacArthur since 1974, including since 1983 at 1700 S. MacArthur Blvd. He also lives in the area.

"This was the west edge of town when we moved in here," Yanow said.

Yanow said he too is glad to see the attention on MacArthur, though he said much of the improvements would be up to individual businesses and homeowners.

"We can ask people to clean up their lots, which is a good idea, but there's only so much we can do," he said.

Ward 7 Ald. Judy Yeager, who represents the area along the boulevard, said there has been a tendency to wait for completion of the next big road project as the key to reviving vacant areas along the commercial route.

She added she is pleased to see both residents and business owners involved in the latest effort to get ahead of the MacArthur extension.

"There's been nothing quite this comprehensive," she said.

Yeager said the extension would bring "immeasurable" change to the stretch between Wabash and South Grand avenues. A group of Springfield developers also is planning the Legacy Pointe lifestyle center just north of what would become the MacArthur/I-72 intersection.

The 300-acre development on either side of the extension would include shopping, residential development and recreational facilities.

Association members expect the extension to bring increased traffic from south of the city and onto MacArthur north of Wabash Avenue. City planning and design coordinator Paul O'Shea said, with the right mix of marketing and aesthetic improvements, it could be a major boost for residential and commercial growth. "It has to be aggressive, but you have to have something to sell," he said.

Jake Gronewold, who coordinates entrepreneurship programs for the Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce, has helped with organization of the MacArthur association. He said participation has grown little by little, adding that the goal is to start small on efforts to spruce up the boulevard, before tackling the major vacancies, such as the Kmart building.

"We want to do some small projects, and that should get more people involved," Gronewold said.

Schramm-Bacher Jewelers Inc. owner Michael Schramm moved the business into Town & Country Shopping Center from Montvale Plaza about four years ago. He said he has seen the best and worst of the boulevard - steady traffic and a busy retail center on the one hand, littering and the threat of crime on the other.

Schramm said he started attending association meetings because, "we want to see where things are going."

He hopes the group can begin to make visible changes, while preserving the best of the boulevard.

"There's a lot of good potential here, and there's some good people involved," he said.

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## Want More INFO?

- Who: MacArthur Boulevard Business Association
- What: Group, which nearly has 60 members, was formed to encourage improvements along the boulevard, primarily between South Grand and Wabash avenues.
- When: Meets at 7:30 a.m. on the second Thursday of each month at the American Red Cross headquarters, 1045 Outer Park Drive.
- did you know?

Town & Country Shopping Center on MacArthur Boulevard is one of the oldest centers in the city, opening in 1961.

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