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Decades of work produces an amazing West Side story

By **JERRY D. REECE** Guest Columnist



Reece

Welcome to the West Side —an amazing story of overcoming obstacles that encumber urban progress. The revitalization of this formerly disinvested pocket of our city's urban core is proof that the collective vision, energy and resources of residents, business owners, investors and civic leaders — led by an effective community development corporation — can fuel a tremendous turnaround.

For more than three decades, a group of residents, entrepreneurs and civic leaders has worked tirelessly to turn a once forgotten area of town into an economically thriving community. Today patrons regularly visit bustling restaurants and shops, residents are proud of their homes and blocks, and business owners seize new opportunities to expand their enterprises. In fact, in recent months, business volumes have increased as much as 25 percent for some merchants along Southwest Boulevard.

Today it's difficult to tell the West Side was once a struggling neighborhood. In 1970, the neighborhood was dotted with uninhabitable structures and reeling from the geographical dissection of the community — a result of major highway and road construction. The circumstances were so dire that **Kansas City's Planning and Development Department** proclaimed the area "no longer viable for residential use."

In 1973, the **Westside Housing Organization**, a nonprofit community development corporation, engaged and united citizens and became a leading catalyst for neighborhood improvement. As longtime residents can attest, it takes significant funding, continual collaboration and time to reclaim ownership of a blighted neighborhood. With direction and long-term commitment from WHO, residents and community leaders achieved impressive outcomes and captured the attention of private funders who are investing in the neighborhood.

In addition to commercial development, WHO reinvigorated residential growth in the area and enhanced safety. Since 1985, 80 new homes have been built and sold. Absentee landlords, for the most part, have been eliminated. The rental market has been revitalized with the

demolition of substandard housing and the construction of Villa Del Sol, a 120-unit mixed-income, multi-family development that includes 10 single-family homes. Property values have increased 200 percent. Furthermore, the crime rate in the West Side last year was 49 percent lower than surrounding areas

Another important player, the **Community Action Center**, erased years of neglect by initiating residential education efforts, launching numerous neighborhood cleanups and addressing delayed property maintenance issues. In March, CAN opened a day labor and drop-in center for immigrant laborers — providing a central location for workers to find employment and gain access to other important services. Just recently, a bank opened on Southwest Boulevard — the first financial institution to open its doors on the West Side in 40 years.

With the Kansas City's new downtown arena, business construction and housing boom under way, prospects for the West Side's continued growth are very promising — especially if downtown developers and city leaders embrace and promote the progress that has been achieved by this unique and distinctive community. The key will be to build upon the West Side's success and consider it a complement to the momentum that is resurrecting downtown.

Through myriad challenges, those invested in this neighborhood remain focused on their vision. The West Side is a destination — a vibrant extension of our city's downtown. Let us use the lessons learned by the West Side's decades of hard work to enhance the quality of life and bring back the hustle and bustle to other “once forgotten” pockets of urban Kansas City.

Jerry D. Reece is president and CEO of Reece & Nichols Realtors and Donor Advisory Board chairman of the Kansas City Community Development Initiative.