Area east of Capitol set for design plans

By JORDAN PASCALE
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Over the past few decades, developers have focused on improvements to the areas north and west of the Capitol. Now, a member of the Nebraska Capitol Environ Commission thinks the neglected area to the south and east could use a cohesive vision.

Cecil Stewart, a commissioner with the group that oversees and protects the area around the Capitol, thinks it’s time to turn attention to the area between 14th and 21st streets from Washington Street on the south to S Street on the north by creating a long-range plan with design standards.

The Capitol Environ Commission has statutory authority to promote and encourage public and private urban development to enhance and protect the grounds and views of the Nebraska State Capitol.

Lincoln Mall got attention in the 60’s and 70’s as the county/city complex grew, and Centennial Mall is getting a facelift in time for Nebraska’s 150th anniversary in 2017, thanks in part to the commission.

Steward, a downtown resident and former planning commissioner, said the areas east and south of the Capitol have a diverse mix of historic structures of varying conditions, new areas of public and private investment and areas of blight and deterioration.

See PLAN, Page B2

Plan
Continued from B1

"In general, this district of Lincoln has not reached its potential and has opportunities to enhance and strengthen the sustainability of the Capitol environs or the overall urban quality of downtown Lincoln," he said.

Many buildings in the area are in transition or ready for redevelopment, like the Pershing Center, the Windstream warehouse, Bennett Martin library, the old YWCA building, the Federal Building parking garage and some state and university properties.

Steward works for the Joslyn Castle Institute for Sustainable Communities that aims to create environments that promote sustainability.

Steward wants the city Planning Department to create a sub-area known as the "East Capitol District" and help it fit into the overall 2040 Comprehensive Plan.

The developments along Centennial Mall, Antelope Valley and the West Haymarket have shown there is a demand for new types of low-, mid- and high-end housing options.

More residents will in turn create a demand for more businesses and commerce, alternative transportation options and more vibrancy in the high-density area, he said.

Steward points to Omaha’s Midtown Crossing and Midtown neighborhood revitalization as a great example of higher-density housing aimed at different household income levels combined with retail.

However, Planning Director Marvin Krout has said he doesn’t think there is staff or money to undertake a study right now. There are other plans, like the Downtown Master Plan and Capitol Environ Commission Design Standards, created in the 70s, that address pieces of the district.

Steward said he realizes Krout has to be practical about department limitations, but he hopes a plan could be broken into smaller, phased pieces or the department could at least have a commitment on “planning to plan” the area.

Steward said he’s been a proponent of the idea for decades but noticed the fervor for the neighborhoods after a recent public hearing on sidewalk and tree removal along Goodhue Boulevard.

Those meetings sparked a wave of neighbor involvement at the commission’s meetings.

“They are passionate and intensely interested in the long-term quality of the area and the central districts of downtown Lincoln,” Steward said.

Jeff Searcy, chairman of the Capitol Environ Commission, said Lincoln is blessed with outstanding neighborhoods, but there also needs to be progress.

“There’s opportunity for more resurgence,” he said. “Progress is often gradual, but talking about forward-thinking ideas on Goodhue and J Street will be beneficial.

“Look at Centennial and Lincoln Malls – that all came out of visionary thinking.”

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