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Blighted area eyed for revitalization

Transit, sustainable development likely to be themes in rescue of near-north neighborhood

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A proposed passenger rail line between downtown and Noblesville has drawn applause from Hamilton County commuters enduring highway congestion.

But local leaders and, soon, a national team of experts, are quietly developing a strategy to revitalize what lies on the other end of the line: Marion County's biggest concentration of brownfield sites and impoverished urban neighborhoods.

The effort is focused on a three-quarter-mile radius centered on East 22nd Street and the Monon Trail, an area now referred to in some quarters as the Indianapolis Smart Growth Redevelopment District.

In late summer or early fall, a team dispatched by the American Institute of Architects will arrive to study the blighted area and draw up a plan for its reuse.

The AIA's Sustainable Design Assessment Team initiative will involve volunteers from around the nation ranging from urban designers to economists to hydrologists. The national trade group for architects takes on only a handful of such projects every year.

Roughly half the cost is being covered by AIA, the rest from a \$15,000 grant from Citizens Energy.

"If this is successful, we can take it to other areas of the city," said Karen Haley, director of the city's Office of Sustainability.

Local leaders are reluctant to discuss what the team might recommend. But a few themes are apparent.

One is the potential to use rail transit to spark redevelopment. City agencies last year gave their blessing to use the abandoned Nickel Plate railroad corridor as the chosen route for a diesel light rail line to Noblesville.

Planners have batted around the idea of train stations in areas where the former Nickel Plate intersects with 16th, 22nd and 25th streets. It's in this area where the corridor parallels another former rail line, the Monon, which has been converted to a walking and biking trail. The Monon trail component is another asset the revitalization plan will include.

Just when the Nickel Plate will be humming with modern diesel passenger cars is anybody's guess. Bills to create a funding mechanism for such a rail line were derailed in the most recent session of the Indiana General Assembly.

The Central Indiana Regional Transportation Authority, which would implement the rail line, is nevertheless moving forward with an environmental-impact

"It's laying the groundwork here for when the stations come," said Christopher Harrell, the city's brownfield redevelopment coordinator.

Brownfield sites generally are derelict pieces of land and buildings, often with soil and water contamination that presents an obstacle to redevelopment.

In the last four years, Harrell and the Department of Metropolitan Development have lassoed more than \$2.6 million in brownfield grant awards from state and federal agencies. There have been some notable successes, such as the redevelopment of the Ertel Manufacturing site at 2045 Dr. Andrew J. Brown Ave., which has been partially demolished and will be redeveloped by Indianapolis-based Major Tool and Machine.

And then there's the former National Automobile Manufacturing Corp., which cranked out vehicles during the 1920s when central Indiana—home to other carmakers such as Stutz and Duesenberg—was known as "little Detroit." The 1145 E. 22nd St. site is now the home of



Seeding a brownfield

The area surrounding the intersection of East 22nd Street and the Monon Trail has the biggest concentration of brownfield sites in the county. Some notable sites:

- 1. 1011 E. 22nd St.** In early 1900s, was Maas-Niemeyer furniture plant and, later, Aluminum Finishing Corp. Petroleum remediation work under way. Now site for Habitat for Humanity of Greater Indianapolis.
- 2. 1145 E. 22nd St.** Former National Motor Vehicle Co. plant, which made electric and gasoline cars from 1900 to 1924. Site is now home of Project School charter school.
- 3. 2102 Yandes St.** The 1-1/2-acre triangular site is where abandoned CSX rail line joins Monon Trail. Site contaminated with petroleum from illegal former auto salvage business.
- 4. 2045 Dr. Andrew J. Brown Ave.** In 1872, became site of Indianapolis Rail Car Manufacturing Co. From 1917 to 1998, housed Ertel Manufacturing Corp. City began demolition in 2007 at site contaminated with lead, PCBs and other materials. City picked Major Tool and Machine's redevelopment proposal.
- 5. 2124 Sheldon St.** Former Custom Finishing Inc. EPA removed drums from site in 1990s, though groundwater contamination lingers.
- 6. 2102 Hillside Ave.** Former American Lead foundry site, now used to store concrete forms, still registers high lead levels in soil and groundwater.

Source: Brownfields Redevelopment Program/Department of Metropolitan Development

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Project School, a charter school.

Harrell said anchoring the brownfield remediation to transportation and sustainability themes takes the work to revitalize the area to a higher level.

Previous AIA SDAT projects run the gamut, but often they involve reuse of existing structures in an environmentally friendly way. In Willingboro, N.J., for example, part of a giant 1950s-era shopping plaza was converted to a public library following an SDAT visit. A former Woolworth's store was gutted and floor-to-ceiling windows and skylights were installed to slash electricity demand.

After pulling PCB-oozing transformers from the site, vegetation replaced concrete, keeping the area cooler and reducing demand on the city's storm sewers.

“If this is successful, we can take it to other areas of the city.”

Kären Haley, Office of Sustainability director

But Willingboro, like the upcoming project in Indianapolis, is not just about clever reuse.

“It's to improve the quality of life and make the community more livable,” said Haley, the city's sustainability director.

The economic demographics for the area within a three-quarter-mile radius of 22nd Street and the Monon Trail are dreadful.

According to data Harrell's team culled, unemployment rates in recent years have hovered around 18 percent. Most households in the area—about 56 percent—have an annual income under \$20,000.

The causes are more complicated than the pullout of big industrial companies a generation ago, and it's clear many of the residents are beaten down. Enter another theme of the district revitalization, known as social sustainability.

Run a transit line through the area and the neighborhood kid going to high school sits next to the doctor headed downtown to work. Young people aspire to something better when they're exposed to people who have succeeded, said Brad Beaubien, of Ball State University's College of Architecture and Planning, who is participating in the redevelopment district efforts.

Or imagine the train opening employment opportunities up and down the line for those who live in the neighborhood, Beaubien added. The concept of mingling the classes this way was lost back when the last of the interurban passenger railroads that once radiated from Indianapolis rolled into history around World War II, he said. “The train station changes the dynamic.”

Yet whatever the ultimate plan to revitalize the district, it mustn't force out residents of the community, Haley said.

Sanford Garner, founding partner of Indianapolis architectural firm A2S04 and a member of the steering committee for the SDAT project, remembers the unintended consequences of the Fall Creek Place revitalization project, to the west.

Vacant lots and abandoned homes were gutted and rebuilt—eventually driving up the tax base—and driving out some residents who'd lived there for years. Although successful as far as redevelopment, “there was a lot of gentrification,” Garner said. Being sensitive to the concerns of area residents has been part of the SDAT discussion, he said.

Those discussions have also generated a number of innovative ideas. While working with CSX Railroad to help evict a man involved in illegal dumping at 2102 Yandes St., Harrell was struck by the potential to use the abandoned CSX rail bed. It hooks up with the Monon trail at this location then runs east, past Keystone Enterprise Park, all the way to Brookside Park, at Sherman Drive.

Might this corridor also be used as a trail and possibly paralleled some day by a transit line running to the east, Harrell wonders. That potential likely will be considered by the AIA team.

If such studies seem like mere planning exercises, Garner says to consider the results of an AIA “Rural/Urban Design Assistant Team” that visited the then-dumpy western edge of downtown in the mid-1970s.

Many of their recommendations helped shape White River State Park, which in the 1980s sprouted notable attractions, such as the Indianapolis Zoo. •



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