

Urban Revitalization: A Small Matter?

BY ELLEN JENSEN

Small businesses are playing a huge part in Kansas City's urban renewal.

Small businesses are the backbone of Kansas City, and much of their effort now is focused on the urban core. Just a few years ago, consumers and businesses were exiting the city centers for the suburbs, but the tide is turning and formerly neglected areas of the city are coming back to life.

Ghost Town

Christina Boveri started selling real estate downtown four years ago. She accepted the position because she has a passion for the urban core and a love for old buildings and their architecture. But, at first it was a tough sell, she said. When you're selling dirt on Gillham Road, you have to be creative and paint pictures of what the city will become.

"I would go downtown, and it would be a ghost town," Boveri said. "I thought, 'This is ridiculous. What can I do to help give this place some new life? It's so pretty, and nobody's here.'"

After a few years, she was ready to go out on her own, and in January, she opened Boveri Realty in the Crossroads District. She wanted a boutique that focused on bringing people downtown. She said Boveri Realty goes beyond the real estate is about creating a viable city where people will want to live, work and play.

"I wanted to find a group of people that had my core vision, that have a passion for revitalization issues," she said.

Her business specializes in condos, lofts and townhouses from the river to the Plaza and from State Line to Troost, but Boveri said she also receives lots of inquiries about commercial real estate. Currently, she forwards most of those leads to other companies, but she hopes one day to

have a commercial division to help find any interested person an urban space. She envisions becoming an urban resource center for individuals wanting to come downtown.

The efforts of Boveri and others like her have made a difference in downtown Kansas City.

"When entrepreneurs purchase real estate and improve property to operate their businesses, they typically are clearing up blighted areas, improving the tax base for the city, bringing employees back to the area, and residents have more job opportunities near their housing," said Brian Standage, director of finance for the Economic Development Corporation.

The EDC, which administers loan funds to help entrepreneurs start, relocate and grow their businesses, primarily in Kansas City, Mo., has seen increased activity in the River Market, then the Crossroads district and, more recently, east of the downtown area in the Troost corridor from about 31st Street to 63rd. Once a few businesses move into an area, there is a ripple effect, and suddenly, that area starts looking appealing to more businesses, Standage said.

Community

That being the case, the Crossroads has seen quite a few ripples. Many entrepreneurs have started or moved their businesses to the area. However, not only are people moving their busi-

nesses downtown, many are starting to live there as well. Boveri said there are now 1,900 units—condos and lofts—available from the river to the Plaza, and at least 2,000 more will be available next year.

"The resale market also is going to heat up over the next couple of years, as these units start flipping," Boveri said. "Some are buying for investment; others will want or need to move for various reasons."

The combination of small businesses, retail shops and residential units makes for a sense of community, which is exactly what the Crossroads Community Association is striving for.

"Everyone on the board is engaged and committed to building a neighborhood—not just buildings, but a community," said Chris Accardo, vice president of the Crossroads Association, which is made up of a combination of residents and business owners.

Accardo's family has been involved in the Crossroads district since 1964, when his photographer father made his first real estate purchase in the area. His father started Custom Color in 1969, and since then founded Accardo Arts & Design, a real estate developing company where Chris spends most of his time.

Putting together that community involves small businesses, which have brought a vitality to the area and given it life more akin to other cities

around the country, such as Chicago and Portland, where there is much activity downtown with restaurants, galleries and retail shops, as well as other types of businesses and residential buildings, Accardo said.

Investment

"The fact that small business owners are making an investment and taking ownership in what's happening in this area is huge," Accardo said. "They are dressing up the buildings, planting flowers and cleaning up the streets. When you see people jogging downtown, you know it's becoming a community because people are starting to live down here too."

Jim Wheeler, owner of Wheeler Audio, is one of those city-dweller converts. Tired of the long drive back and forth to Weston, Mo., he now lives several blocks from his business and often rides his bike to work.

Wheeler Audio had been a tenant of Take Two Productions in the Crossroads for 10 years. Because the company gets a lot of business from and through Take Two, when it was time to move out of the building, it made sense to stay close. Another factor was that because the nature of their work—sound design—is creative, their customers tend to thrive in the energy that surrounds the Crossroads district, Wheeler said.

Local entrepreneurs have invested in the community in other ways. First