

"Another View"

By Troy Nash. Kansas City Call: August 19, 2005.

Eric Wesson took a very negative view of the Third District Town Hall Meeting that Sandra McFadden-Weaver and I hosted on August 6. In a commentary published last week, Wesson took issue primarily with our attempt to talk about positive developments in the district, which he called a look “through rose-colored glasses.” Wesson and I must not have been at the same meeting, because I distinctly recall talking about the challenges that inner city neighborhoods face, with crime and racism heading the list. It is true, though, that we talked far more about recent good news than about long-standing negatives.

The problems of abandoned houses, tall weeds, crime, poverty, and unemployment are not new. Third District residents, myself included, do not need a guided tour to acquaint themselves with these facts. They are self-evident. What is not always immediately evident is our response to these problems, as it is often obscured by the results of a long, intense, malevolent neglect. For that reason, we made the conscious choice to highlight good things happening in the Third District and the ways that we are trying to stamp out the problems. We strove to make hidden triumphs like Weld Wheel, reStart, Georgetown Estates, and Prince of Peace church become visible.

Some in our community are refusing to acknowledge the existence of any progress. Some of the same people who have for decades called for investment in the urban core (and rightly so) now simply ignore the fact that more economic development is taking place in the Third District than at any other time in history. For reasons unknown to me, these people would prefer that you believe that our neighborhoods are vast wastelands of absolute misery and unhappiness, where nothing worth singing about happens. The media reinforces this negative image – when was the last time you saw a positive story about the east side on Channel 5? I refuse to be complicit in this task, which requires the constant reiteration of failure and a passing over of success.

Although far from a complete tally, the \$142 million of Third District investment Wesson mentioned is nothing to laugh at. Aided by \$25 million in city investment, primarily through new infrastructure (and not, as Wesson wrote, through tax breaks), this development means jobs for residents, new quality affordable housing, and more stable neighborhoods. Our progress isn't comparable in size or scale to the development downtown, where much remains to be done in increasing minority participation, but that doesn't make it irrelevant or meaningless either.

Frankly, the arch-negative attitude that I encounter more and more from “activists” and “community leaders” is not only out of step with the hesitant optimism I hear from constituents, but counter-productive to progress. Why be surprised that one has to travel out of the district to buy certain necessities when national chains willing to locate at 39th and Prospect, taking a risk on an indisputably blighted neighborhood, are criticized as “disrespectful” and exploitative seven months before they have even begun construction? Moreover, it's not as though the shopping centers of the suburbs are renowned for their respect for our community. This very newspaper published the NAACP's report card

for general merchandisers. Six of eleven major chains, including Dillard's and J.C. Penney, refused to respond. Of those who did bother to reply, including Wal-Mart, Nordstrom, and the company that owns the Jones Store, none received a grade higher than "C." Yet, these are the stores that Mr. Wesson apparently has no qualms about traveling to Overland Park to patronize.

As long as black people have been in this country, we have been fighting amongst ourselves over how best to describe our dilemma. There have always been some who wish to paint a strictly negative picture of oppression, suppression, depression, and rejection. They have fiercely denounced anyone who pointed out the slightest success story as out-of-touch, uninformed, or unconcerned. John Johnson, the founder of Ebony magazine who passed last week, was lambasted throughout the 1950s and 1960s by other blacks. His "sin" was focusing on the achievement and the successes of African-Americans going about life in spite of the strident racism and massive poverty around them, rather than devoting every issue to chronicling the woes that afflicted the community.

That attitude remains with us today. I am not saying that the Third District is a modern Eden. I am not saying that we haven't massive work to do. And I am certainly not committing myself to mindless optimism or purely symbolic politics. But if we are to ever achieve an urban renaissance, it must begin with a revitalization of respect for ourselves. By this I do not mean just our personal selves, but the collective character of our community. If we cannot find anything nice to say about our neighborhoods, why should anyone else? We are all sophisticated enough to know that \$142 million in city-spurred development does not make all of our problems go away, that progress is not the same as paradise, and that real change in this country usually comes through gradual processes.

Ridding us of the corrupt inefficiencies of HEDFC and a certain brand of self-centered, rather than community-centered, "leadership" has gone a long way towards creating a new day for the Third District. The many remaining problems that we face cannot be overcome by looking at the world through rose-colored glasses. But wearing blinders that prevent us from seeing the small victories that we do win is also not the answer.