

PROSPECT CORRIDOR | Killings bring attention — bad and good



DAVID PULLIAM/The Kansas City Star

Brush was cleared Saturday from this vacant lot near 23rd Street and Prospect Avenue. Aaron Claiborne, 15, was one of several persons who participated in a neighborhood cleanup and rally after the recent discovery of slaying victims in the Prospect Avenue corridor. Story, A-8

Many hold hope for turnaround in community

By MALCOLM GARCIA
The Kansas City Star

Charles McRoy sees good people living along Prospect Avenue every day.

Hard-working, decent people, including the youngsters. Presentable. Well-mannered. Not a bad word out of their mouths as they wave to him on their way to school.

It is his hope that as the city focuses on the Prospect Avenue corridor after the discovery of six bodies, these good people will take a stand against the bad.

"Everybody here's not into drug-dealing; not all ladies work the corners. That's the tragedy," said McRoy, 62. "There're good people living here. Real good."

The deaths rocked this community, and after a week of horrific news, men and women like McRoy began talking about what needed to be done to stop the killing and turn the area around.

Many residents recall a time when Prospect was a peaceful, prosperous place where families enjoyed going out at night in brightly lighted streets. They could eat at restaurants, listen to music, visit friends and frequent businesses. It was a place, they say, to be seen. But over the years, the area declined as crime spread, people moved away and houses were abandoned.



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"If you don't discipline, the children turn out bad."

Arthur Young

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Analysis of block points up depth of area's neglect

By MICHAEL MANSUR
and LYNN HORSLEY
The Kansas City Star

When postal worker Curtis Walker walks his route in the Prospect Avenue corridor, he sees the hallmarks of urban blight: trash, weed-infested vacant lots and abandoned homes.

"There is a sense of hopelessness here," Walker said. "It seems like nobody cares."

An analysis by *The Kansas City Star* of property conditions in the 2600 block of Montgall Avenue — where two of the six corridor murder victims were found recently — illustrates the depth of the corridor's neglect.

Examining public records maintained by Jackson County and Kansas City, *The Star* found:

■ Of the 30 properties on the block, 17 are owned by someone living somewhere else, from as far away as Los Angeles to some of the metropolitan area's most desirable suburbs, including Olathe,

■ Slaying victim receives a spirited goodbye. A-9

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Overland Park and Lee's Summit. Three lots are owned by Land Trust of Jackson County, an agency that in tax foreclosure sales takes control of delinquent properties no one wants.

■ Seventy-three weed citations have been issued against owners in recent years, as well as more than a dozen other property maintenance violations. Only two of the 30 properties showed no recent violations.

■ Nine property owners are delinquent on taxes. Two buildings are so run down they are slated for demolition. Nine other parcels stand vacant, houses already razed, with weeds rising in their place.

See ANALYSIS, A-8

PROSPECT: Despite pain, many see promise

Continued from A-1

In the past decade, the number of violent crimes reported to police has dropped, but the general area where the bodies have been found — 76 blocks between 20th and 30th streets, and Brooklyn Avenue and Benton Boulevard — has seen three dozen murders. And now it bears the stain of a potential serial killer.

"I think the most important thing is to get these (prostitutes) off the street and tear down vacant housing," said Mavene Gant, 22, as she walked down 27th Street toward Prospect after attending a Bible study. "This area doesn't get enough attention."

Nearby, Larry Story, 58, pointed to an empty lot at the intersection shrouded by trees and brush. "I remember when there was a store there," he said. "Now, for all I know, there could be a dead body beneath the trees."

Four of the bodies discovered in the area have been identified as women who had drug convictions, and three had been arrested on charges related to prostitution.

McRoy found the first body July 14 when he was clearing weeds behind his apartment.

"He leaned on the railing of his 23rd Street apartment building near Prospect and recalled that moment in a quiet voice."

"I thought there'd be a distance between me and that stuff, violent situations and death," said McRoy, a retired firefighter. "Then it comes to my back door. I was upset. No matter their lifestyle, they didn't deserve that. They deserved the opportunity to go through life unmo-
lested and alive."

Despite its problems, much of Prospect and the streets around it appear to be well-tended working-class neighborhoods. One- and two-story brick houses with wrap-around wood porches and shaded by tall trees rise above trimmed lawns, and well-kept cars line the streets.

But a growing tension begins to linger long before nightfall, when some intersections along the corridor attract drug dealers and prostitutes. Young people hang out at bus stops and roam the sidewalks. Homeowners view strangers with suspicion and watch unfamiliar cars until they have driven out of sight.

One morning last week, despite the heavy presence of police, a 24-year-old prostitute openly trotted the intersection of 23rd and Prospect. "I'm just glad it's not me," the prostitute said of the murdered women.

The discovery of the bodies has been bad for business, said the woman, who declined to give her name. "We don't make money any more on the street," she said. "The girls are afraid they'll get killed, and I think the tricks are, too."

At Southside Barber Shop, near 22nd Street and Prospect, barber Arthur Young clipped the hair of longtime customer R. H. Love. They had both observed the prostitute earlier.

"Some of the problems here come from the system taking discipline away from the parents," said Young, 75. "If you don't discipline, the children turn out bad. If my parents let me have my own way, I wouldn't be here now."

"Oh, yeah, it wasn't like this for us coming up," said Love, 69. "I'm surprised by what happened. It's not a saintly area, but the killings were unusual because of the brutality."

Efforts to turn life around on Prospect and in nearby neighborhoods are already in the making.

Last week the city pledged extra money for police work, building demolition, and weed and trash cleanup. On Saturday, the Washington-Wheatley Neighborhood Improvement Association held a rally and cleanup. These efforts are a start, McRoy said. "The interest has to be there and stay there," he said. "The neighborhoods and the powers that be downtown have to be there. It could look like the best parts of Kansas City."

"I'd like to see a day when Prospect could look like Westport. I'd like to see little 14- and 15-year-old girls standing at the bus stop without hearing unneeded conversation by someone who thinks every woman here is a prostitute. But it's going to take all of us investing in it."

At a McDonald's, men and women from the Prospect Avenue corridor regularly gather weekday mornings to talk. Many of the participants have lived on or near Prospect for years.

"I could sit on my porch when I was growing up," said Delores Royston, who lives near 24th Street and Wabash Avenue. "I could run down to the grocery store. Some nights when it was real hot, you could get you a blanket and lay out in the park and nobody'd bother you."

Those days now seem distant. Today, suspicion and the dread of a chance encounter with the wrong person have replaced the faded memories of a bygone era.

"This morning," Royston said on Wednesday, "I got up at 6 to take the trash out, and I saw a man walking up the street. That's frightening. Here you are taking the trash out, and you're a woman. You don't know what they'll do. Grab your purse, take your car keys."

"Sometimes cars are just flying down that street making that run, get one of those prostitutes."

Sitting beside her, Cleo Ashford, 51, said: "I called the police Saturday morning because a guy was lying on the sidewalk at 24th Terrace. I didn't know what was wrong with him."

"What I'd like to see happen is for our council people to take a proactive attitude toward neighborhood associations who come to them with problems. Maybe if they had given us what we needed, those girls would be alive today. I don't know."

Standing at the 27th and Prospect bus stop, Gregory Powell worried that his missing 39-year-old niece might be one of the victims, two of whom remained unidentified as of Saturday. He said she was last seen a few weeks ago at 29th Street and Park Avenue.

"I just want them to catch the killer," said Powell, 52. "There's no knowing who's next."

Some people living along Prospect expressed skepticism that significant change would result from the renewed interest in the area. They said it was just a passing moment, a phase that would disappear once all the hype around the murders faded.

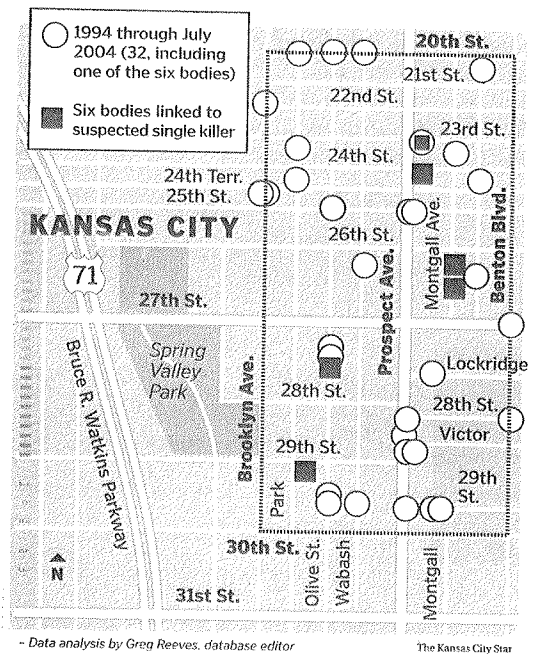
But other residents, like McRoy, feel a cautious optimism. He urged his neighbors and the city to turn tragedy into opportunity.

"There's been a lot of pain here," he said. "There're more victims than six. We're all victims. We have a sickness in the inner city that has to be healed. God's not prevailing enough in people's lives. We need to start the healing."

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HOMICIDES SINCE 1994

Thirty-seven homicides have been investigated since 1994 in the area where six bodies were found recently.



Data analysis by Greg Reeves, database editor

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Volunteers erase weeds, trash from neighborhood

By KEVIN HOFFMANN
The Kansas City Star

Vacant lots at the corner of 23rd Street and Prospect Avenue — overrun by litter, out-of-control weeds, trees and brush — never stood a chance.

Not when hundreds of neighbors, volunteers and community activists arrived Saturday morning determined to spruce up the eyesore and bring fresh energy for other improvements.

Armed mainly with gloves, a few rakes and a couple of chainsaws, the crew took a few hours of their weekend to make a difference.

When they left, the perfect camouflage for a few puffs off a crack pipe or a prostitute's quick trick was gone.

The goal Saturday during the Stop the Violence rally and neighborhood cleanup effort was to take back a neighborhood plagued by drug activity and prostitution. It is now the center of a serial murder case that has left six victims hidden in empty lots and vacant structures.

"It's not dead yet," Henry E. Lyons of the Prospect Corridor Im-

provement Initiative said of the neighborhood. "But it's not what it once was."

Marlon Hammons, president of the Washington-Wheatley Neighborhood Improvement Association, said he and others began planning for the event July 14 after a man spraying weeds found the body of Anna Ewing behind a near-vacant apartment building. It gained momentum after five more bodies were found.

Many participants hoped the effort would continue, in another lot, on another corner.

"It's certainly a first step in the right direction," said Skip Hill, who lives in Lee's Summit but owns several properties in the area. "But will it be sustained?"

Missouri National Guardsmen discussed drug prevention with a group of youths. Across the street, volunteers with Veronica's Voice distributed literature on the perils of prostitution. Police Capt. Rich Lockhart said investigators reported no new developments Saturday.

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ANALYSIS: Block illustrates area's neglect

Continued from A-1

Within the 1.7 square-mile corridor, which stretches for four blocks on either side of Prospect between 18th Street and Brush Creek, one in four properties is vacant, according to a recent city study.

As a result, just a handful of homes still are maintained and lived in by their owners. The traditional tenets of American neighborhoods — families, children and financial security — are largely lost, although some homeowners have persevered and even thrived.

Marlon Hammons, president of the Washington-Wheatley Neighborhood Improvement Association, who toured the 2600 block of Montgall last week with a reporter, said the block once was one of the area's better ones. It had curbs and sidewalks that some other blocks in the corridor did not.

But with so little attention from city officials, Hammons said, even the best blocks have dwindled to mostly weed-choked lots, boarded-up buildings and a few remaining dedicated homeowners.

The city's neglect has helped contribute to the area's crime, Hammons believes. And the area's high vegetation and scrub trees provide the perfect cover for criminals or their victims. "If I can't see you in there," Hammons said, pointing to a weedy Land Trust lot at 26th and Montgall, "I can't help you."

Since 1950, the corridor's population has dwindled from more than 60,000 residents to a little more than 20,000 by 2000. During that exodus, the area lost more than half its housing units — some 1,700 of them between 1990 and 2000.

Despite new city spending, the erosion of property and people has continued. Since 2002, city officials have identified 56 additional properties that have been demolished or have been slated for demolition. Neighborhood leaders say the city should step up the efforts, because even more buildings should be razed.

Some blocks in the area, though, have managed to thrive. In the nearby Santa Fe neighborhood, for example, homeowners are fiercely proud of their properties and have worked hard on neighborhood cleanups and crime-prevention efforts, said resident Karmello Coleman. "We want it to be all that it can be," Coleman said of the corridor. "We don't live in a ghetto."

City officials pledged this week to step up spending to address the corridor's problems. But Coleman said she and other residents wondered, why now? Why not sooner?

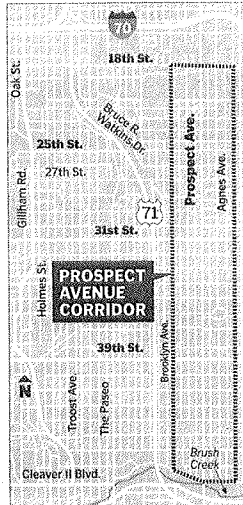
"Why did it take six murders? Why was that the catalyst to wake people up?" Coleman asked. "You know and see what the needs are. You don't need murders to tell you that."

Tension among leaders

Four summers ago, neighborhood activists and Councilman Troy Nash, who represents the council's 3rd District at large, held a 144-hour vigil at 39th Street and Prospect, one of the corridor's high-crime corners.

Nash and his supporters intended to call attention to the area's plight, and its potential. Since then, the city has directed more than \$400,000 in federal grant money toward developing the corridor, according to city records. Records also show more than \$300,000 of that went to contracts for Nash aides and campaign supporters for planning and neighborhood organizing.

Too little, some corridor leaders say, went toward actually fixing the area's problems.



"Nash defended the spending, saying it resulted in a good plan. He also said it would be 'unfair' to imply people were hired because of their connections to him. He said that they pursued the jobs without his assistance and were selected by city development department officials because of their qualifications, and that a council majority endorsed the contracts.

A city plan for the corridor was completed in October 2002. But by June 2003 the money had run out and contract hires had left. Since then, a volunteer corridor advisory board has tried to carry on. But it says there is not much to show for the money spent so far.

"More should have been done before now," said Henry Lyons, a real estate developer and chairman of the corridor board of directors.

Lyons grew up at 24th Street and Prospect and remembers when it was a thriving commercial hub. He said the decline began in the 1970s.

When the city this year budgeted an additional \$400,000 for more corridor planning, Lyons and his advisory board tried to get about \$55,000 for staff and office equipment. In addition, they sought \$12,000 to promote commercial development at key intersections along Prospect.

But Nash will not make that money available, Lyons said. "We are out here suffering because he doesn't want to give us funding," he said.

Nash has his own ideas for how the money should be spent. He said he did not support any of the money going to Lyons. "I don't have confidence in the current leadership there. Until that is put in place, I'm not advocating placing the money there," Nash said.

No matter the reason, neighborhood leaders are feeling left out, said Hammons of the Washington-Wheatley association. If money had been spent on more than just planning in the corridor, it would have made a significant statement, Hammons said. "It would have said City Hall is working with us."

Complex cases

City inspectors in the Neighborhood Preservation Division, which

cites owners for property maintenance violations, can only do so much to spur improvements, said Pearline McFall, division manager.

McFall's department, which recently has been down about 10 inspectors, handles 5,000 or more inspections each month. The cases can be complex, she said. An inspector must often search for owners and then try to get them to make improvements to the property. Properties, however, often change ownership.

A property in the 2600 block of Montgall offers an example. City records show inspectors had to make 20 visits over several months, after police reported the building was empty and being used for drug-dealing. Demolition crews were hired. Then demolition was halted. The owner sold the property, and a new owner promised repairs. But the property again fell into disrepair. Demolition contracts were issued again — more than two years after the initial police report.

Today, the property belongs to Land Trust and is frequently cited for high weeds.

In recent weeks, city-contracted crews have cut weeds on Montgall. But they acknowledge they have to mow more frequently to make a real difference.

Land Trust officials say proceeds from their property sales are not enough to adequately maintain the lots. Land Trust can't mow "to a standard we would like to meet," said Aggie Stackhaus, the agency's chairwoman.

"It's a matter of a lack of funding," Stackhaus said. "The maintenance of these lots continues to be a huge problem we don't have our hands around."

Reason for hope?

Nash and City Manager Wayne Cauthen recently announced that the city would spend about \$125,000 of the new \$400,000 on bolstering police patrols, illegal dumping prevention and building demolition.

In addition, Cauthen committed to cut overgrown lots in the corridor for a third time this summer. He also pledged more money for mowing next summer.

Nash said he wanted to use the rest of the \$400,000 to track down absentee landlords, to do an inventory of what existing businesses needed, and to try to promote job creation. "We need to find the (absentee landlords) and get them to take care of their responsibilities," Nash said.

Meanwhile, there are signs of progress:

■ Dozens of new homes have been built between 18th and 25th streets and Vine to Olive streets just west of Prospect. And the city has budgeted hundreds of thousands of dollars to fix sidewalks and repave alleys in the Prospect Avenue corridor.

■ The Kansas City Economic Development Corp. is making money available to remove an old gas station at 28th and Prospect. The corporation also has several loan programs available for small businesses in the area.

■ The city is providing \$85,000 for a comprehensive study of the area's social service resources. That plan, expected early next year, will outline social service needs and ways to fulfill them, said Bruce Eddy, executive director of the Resource Development Institute.

But city leaders say long-term solutions will hinge on economic development.

Lyons, the corridor board chairman, wants to pay Bob Mayer, a consultant and former chairman of the Tax Increment Financing Commission, \$12,000 to develop a plan for commercial anchor projects at 23rd, 27th, 35th and 39th streets and Prospect.

Mayer noted it took seven years to jump-start downtown's revival. "We have to create that same kind of atmosphere on Prospect," he said. "It can be done."

Mayer says he is happy to work with city leaders to bring the area back, if those leaders can come to-

gether. "They have to figure out what they want as a team," he said. "I'm not going to get caught in the middle of crosswinds."

Cauthen agreed that economic development was crucial for the area's future but said the city and neighborhood leaders had much to overcome to promote such development.

Residents will have to work with police to address issues such as drug dealing and prostitution, he said. Police need to work more closely with city officials to alert them to problems the city should address. Businesses must be convinced the neighborhood is a safe place to reinvest.

What's at stake reaches far beyond the ravaged landscape of the Prospect Avenue corridor, city officials point out. The negative national publicity generated by multiple murders, Cauthen said, threatens to undermine many of the improvements under way in Kansas City, especially downtown.

Cauthen cautioned, however, that changing the neighborhood could take some time. "It's not going to be something that will happen overnight," he said. "It didn't start overnight."

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