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Title: Officials hope for extensive agenda - Barnes to deliver State of the City

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As Kansas City Mayor Kay Barnes gives her sixth annual State of the City speech today, she is coming off her most momentous year since taking office.

The downtown revival she has championed since 2001 is finally occurring. The Bartle Hall renovation has begun. Construction has started on the H&R Block headquarters, and land has been cleared for a huge new entertainment district. Voters approved new taxes for an arena and indigent health care. Loft and condo construction is booming.

But as Barnes heads into her final two years in office, her council colleagues and civic leaders say her legacy and the city's future will depend on finishing what's been started and on broadening the vision beyond downtown.

Barnes declined this week to give a preview of her prepared remarks. Aide Steve Glorioso would say only that she would not just focus on tying up loose ends but would outline an aggressive agenda for the rest of her tenure.

In the past year, the mayor has seized the limelight as the chief cheerleader for downtown's new momentum.

Five years ago, we didn't have a story to tell. We now have a story to tell, a real story, something to market around, said Jon Copaken, chairman of the Downtown Council. We're creating an environment that's different in a positive way from anything else in the metro area.

Still, political observers have their own ideas about the city's next moves, and how it should order its priorities. Some themes emerged that people hope Barnes will address:

The performing arts center is the next big piece of the puzzle for downtown. Nearly everyone agrees it needs to be built within the next few years, and they want the mayor to throw more visible support behind it. Several council members said they are intrigued by a proposal to shift the location from a hill south of Bartle Hall to a Lyric Theater site at 11th and Central streets.

From my vision, the new location works better, said Councilwoman Becky Nace. She said that the site next to the Lyric is more centrally located to restaurants and other amenities, and that something else can be built along Broadway.

While downtown is emerging as a vibrant neighborhood, Barnes and the city need to help other neighborhoods share the spotlight.

Take some of the more economically deprived areas, bring them up to speed with downtown, for a more comprehensive economic development focus, said Councilman Troy Nash. If she can use the bully pulpit to fuse these things together, I think that's what the focus should be.

Neighborhood activist Mark Esping agreed. He praised Barnes for rallying businessmen and businesswomen and developers to downtown. But he said residential sections both east and west of downtown deserve her concern as well.

The Rev. Wallace Hartsfield of Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church said attention also needs to extend to African-Americans, Hispanics and other minorities making sure they share in the economic development.

How will it positively impact us, or will we have to stand in line with our hands out? Hartsfield asked. He said he's supportive of downtown's progress, but not optimistic that those besides the city's major power brokers will share in that progress.

As the city builds some glamour projects, council members and others say it cannot neglect basic services.

That means hiring enough police officers and making sure police and fire stations get built promptly. The city also needs to upgrade aging water and sewer pipes, tweak the recycling program to deter illegal dumping, provide more money for minor home repair and deal more aggressively with problem landlords.

Make sure neighborhoods stay on the radar screen, said Gloria Eurotas, executive director of the Kansas City Neighborhood Alliance. Keep trash off the streets, make the parks really usable, deal with infrastructure.

Job creation and development around Kansas City International Airport and the former Richards-Gebaur Airport should also be a higher priority, said council members Nace, Bonnie Sue Cooper and Bill Skaggs.

I think we're in a position now that we can more actively promote bringing in new companies into Kansas City, Cooper said. Job creation has to remain a number one focus for Kansas City.

If the two-term council members are feeling any frustration, it's that progress didn't occur earlier. That's why at least four council members say they're seriously considering running to succeed Barnes as mayor in 2007 to complete unfinished business.

We've got to finish these jobs well, on time and on budget, said Councilman Charles Eddy, a potential mayoral candidate. We have to make sure we get these things completed, and to a standard we've set for ourselves.

Coming up

Mayor Kay Barnes delivers her 2005 State of the City address at 1 p.m. today in the City Council Chamber on the 26th floor of City Hall, 414 E. 12th St. The public is invited to attend. The speech also will be shown on Time Warner Cable Channel 2, the city's government channel.

Photo

Barnes

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