

Star, Folger look at planned office park on Truman Road

By Jim Davis. Kansas City Business Journal: June 22, 2001.

Representatives of The Kansas City Star and Folger Coffee Co. have looked at moving their production plants to a tax-abated business park proposed along Truman Road in Kansas City near the U.S. Postal Service's processing and distribution center.

Harvesters-The Community Food Net-work of Kansas City also reportedly is interested in the East Side site, now dominated by junkyards.

Kansas City Councilwoman Mary Williams-Neal, whose 3rd District includes Truman Road, said this activity justifies her hope for the long-neglected area.

"When I got elected in 1995, people wouldn't come on the east side of Troost," Williams-Neal said. "There is a way to make profits on the east side of Troost."

Art Brisbane, The Star's publisher, said the company isn't actively scouting to move its presses, which are at the newspaper's headquarters at 1729 Grand Blvd. in Kansas City. But Brisbane said The Star eventually could buy land for this purpose.

The Star is being represented by the Austin Co., a suburban Cleveland consultant. Inquiries have been made about 30 acres on the western side of the intended business park. The triangular tract runs east from Cleveland Avenue to Jackson Avenue and north from Truman Road to the Kansas City Belt Railway.

David Biersmith, founder and president of The Truman Road Corridor Association, said officials of the Economic Development Corp. of Kansas City told the group this week that the search will go on hold for two or three months.

The Austin Co. said its client is concerned about the slowing economy.

Knight Ridder Inc., The Star's owner, is cutting jobs here and elsewhere as the company struggles to maintain profits.

Kansas City-area real estate officials familiar with The Star's interest said they expect a relocation decision to be driven by economics. Building a new plant could cost upward of \$50 million, one real estate executive said.

Biersmith said this investment would jump-start development of property the Kansas City Council designated for Chapter 353 tax abatements in May. Using this plan, property taxes on improvements would be eliminated for 10 years and cut in half for an additional 15 years.

Kansas City Councilman Troy Nash, whose 3rd District includes Truman Road, said he supports using "whatever tax incentives are available" to attract The Star or any other company.

Officials of Procter & Gamble Co., which owns Folger, couldn't be reached for comment. Neal said talks continue about relocating Folger's turn-of-the-century plant from 701 Broadway.

Harvesters officials also could not be reached.

Others examining the site include Walton Construction Co. in Kansas City. Kelly Hrabe, a senior business development executive with Walton, said the company probably would want to work with a developer or real estate broker on the project.

Several other prospects also are interested in the proposed development, Biersmith said.

The 65-acre parcel west of Elmwood Cemetery now is scourged by vagrants, some living in abandoned vehicles. Biersmith said he thinks that criminal activity in the area -- drug dealing and prostitution -- is the worst in the city.

"At noon, you wouldn't drive down there," he said.

Reclaiming the property won't be easy. For starters, land would need to be bought. Plans for assembling property are contained in a redevelopment study the Kansas City Council endorsed in November.

The city is awaiting results of soil condition tests to answer questions about environmental contamination.

Al Figuly, assistant director of the Planned Industrial Expansion Authority, said he's talking with developers from St. Louis and Cleveland. The location near Interstate 70 could attract distributors that want good highway access, he said.

Additional financial help for redevelopment could come from the state, he said. Tax credits could be worth as much as the development's economic effect.

Figuly said he's working under the auspices of the EDC, which provides staff for the PIEA.

"We've got the plans in place," he said. "It's just a question of getting the people to implement."

Truman Road advocates praised the broad-based support that has coalesced around the plan. Immediately east of the proposed park, the study recommends building a supermarket-anchored neighborhood shopping center.

The economic development strategy also calls for improving existing buildings and bus service and solving problems with flooding. Housing is another priority because an expanded residential population would improve safety.

Supporters include Sylvester Holmes, executive director of the Black Economic Union, which has developed the Renaissance Cove and Renaissance Place residential subdivisions near Truman Road. Holmes said he envisions the proposed business park resembling those common in the suburbs.

The development would provide jobs for people who live nearby and now must travel elsewhere for work, Holmes said.

Improvements to the area already are coming, Figuly said. He cited Belfonte Ice Cream and Dairy Foods' new headquarters and warehouse, whose construction will start next week on Cleveland Avenue between 16th and 17th streets, along with plans to the north for a Phillips 66 gas station and a Wendy's Old Fashioned Hamburgers restaurant.

Within a year, Figuly said, he expects the business park's development to begin.

"We're not waiting for anyone," he said. "We're actively marketing. Where else in the urban core are you going to find 30 acres?"