

Working to Revitalize South Downtown

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Figure 1 Pedestrians walk outside shops along 11th Street south of downtown. By [Richard Piersol | Lincoln Journal Star](#)

war apartment buildings with the kind of fancy names now reserved for suburbs, a tough minority of well-kept owner-occupied, single-family homes, schools, the F Street Rec Center, 11th Street's boulevard of businesses -- 13th's, too -- and churches that have sheltered more than one denomination through the years.

It is a hive of humanity with modest means and not enough employment, challenged by aging, absentee-owned residential housing (96 percent of the units are rentals, according to NeighborWorks Lincoln).

It's got a reputation, which people are touchy about, for not being safe.

But now, South Downtown has captured the attention of people who have the motive, means and intent to help it survive, revive and thrive as a new urban home for people who want to walk or bike to work, sometimes in the neighborhood, the emerging Haymarket, the established downtown, the university or nearby government offices.

Some people who you might not expect to know the word "funky," much less use it, apply it to the part of Lincoln bounded by A to M, Ninth to 17th streets.

It's South Downtown -- or SoDo, if you're inclined to use abbreviated funk.

It is like an eccentric, beloved relative: an aging, worn but still kicking part of the Near South and Everett neighborhoods, and it includes some heavyweights -- the Capitol, County-City Building, Lincoln Mall and Farmers Mutual headquarters.

It is complicated and genuinely all over the map: stately old mansions cut into apartments, pre- and post-

A year ago, Barbara Bartle and the Lincoln Community Foundation released Vital Signs, a study of Lincoln's vulnerabilities. It showed that the number of people in poverty climbed 48 percent after 2005 and that most were locals who had fallen into poverty rather than poor people moving into town.

Ten years earlier, none of Lincoln's neighborhoods were in "extreme poverty," defined as 40 percent or more of residents falling below the federal poverty threshold. Now, six of the city's 73 census tracts, or regions, are in extreme poverty, two of them in South Downtown.

"That was heavy on my mind," said Bartle, president of the foundation.

A few days later, Tom Smith of Smith Hayes financial services company called Bartle to talk about the area.

"The timing was very interesting," Bartle said. "I gave him a briefing on Lincoln Vital Signs. We thought the stars were aligned."

Smith had been talking to Roger Severin of Olsson Associates, David Schmidt of Concorde Management real estate, and Jim Abel of NEBCO.

With new office space coming to Farmers Mutual's older building under renovation, a new NEBCO office building and Century House, among others, there was a fair amount of space to occupy and not a lot going on in the surroundings of South Downtown.

"There just wasn't a lot of activity, 8 to 5," Smith said. "At least three major thoughts that came out of the conversation: (there's) a lack of strong economic activity related to retail or jobs, the housing stock south of downtown is declining, and the other thing, a perception that I'm not sure is reality, it might not be safe.

"So we started kicking it around. One thing led to another. About the time we concluded we need to do something, the Lincoln Community Foundation's Vital Signs came out. ... That probably solidified what we were thinking about."

He visited with Bartle and got going.

Decades of people knocking down homes and building slip-in apartments had done a number on the neighborhood, Smith said. The housing issue led them to the Nebraska Investment Finance Authority and Tim Kenney. NIFA finances housing.

"He was excited about the opportunity to really examine the area," Smith said. "They've done several projects in Omaha, mirroring what we're doing in South Downtown. So this is not necessarily a first for them, but it was in Lincoln."

Through Urban Development, they got the city on board, formed a steering committee and put out a request for proposals.

From a dozen responses, they got H3 Studio, a St. Louis urban design and community planning operation that had worked in Omaha. H3 and its 3 Hs -- humane, healthy and holistic -- partnered with Lincoln-based Sinclair Hille Architects.

The steering committee, with diverse membership from the neighborhood's stakeholders and experts, had its first meeting of the whole group this week.

A kind of euphoria has ascended.

Committee member Mike Renken went to college in Lincoln, became a banker, left town to work in Enders, Imperial, Norfolk and York, then came back to town to be the chief executive officer of NeighborWorks Lincoln, which works to revitalize neighborhoods and promote home ownership.

"We think it's fantastic," Renken said of the South Downtown project. "That area has changed so dramatically from when I left in '84, and it has such great potential. It does need some help."

Planning processes are in motion: sleeves rolled up, a public breakfast in May to focus attention, a weeklong design charrette. Everybody's at the steering committee table. The Near South and Everett neighborhood organizations are on board.

H3 will pull together an inventory of resources and views, pluses and minuses. They will gather information, interview people, hold public meetings.

"So now we are trying to get off to the races," Smith said.

None of these deals comes free, and the price tag for this is \$150,000. NIFA has put up \$65,000, with the balance coming from the private sector. They're still raising money, Smith added.

How will this not become mere gentrification, turning old structures into Yuppie warrens?

"We don't want to run the people living there away," Smith said. "We want it to be a better place and a more interesting place for others to come to."

He and others believe in the process.

"To work, it has to be stakeholder-driven -- broad, deep and transparent," said Jon Carlson, Mayor Chris Beutler's aide for neighborhoods. "Otherwise it'll end up on a shelf."

"That said, I think there's room in the neighborhood for more market opportunities," he added. "I've given this speech before. ... If you don't have an ability to live the entire arc of your economic life ... then you have a problem with a neighborhood."



From the top of the Capitol, you can see the boulevards and mature trees that make up what public and private leaders want to redefine as South Downtown.





A block in South Downtown includes single-family homes, multi-unit homes, and apartment buildings. Public and private leaders are working together in an attempt to redefine the area.



F Street Neighborhood Church stands at the intersection with 13th Street. Private and public sector leaders are focusing on the city's South Downtown.



Older homes, surrounded by mature trees and apartment buildings sometimes referred to as slip-ins, mark the area south of downtown. Public and private leaders are hoping to redefine what they're calling South Downtown.



Apartment buildings stretch along the south side of F Street between 16th Street and Goodhue Boulevard.