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Thursday, February 19, 2009

The Other Fort Collins

Developers hope to give North College corridor a major face-lift

By [Erin Frustaci](#)

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A sign resting in an empty field across from the Albertsons [ENLARGE](#) 

With a cup of hot coffee in hand, Ron Lautzenheiser, owner of Big O Tires and Grease Monkey on North College, settles into a booth at the Ever Open Cafe. It's Sunday afternoon and the diner is fairly quiet.

He points out the window to a bus stop across the street. Years back, he routinely watched a young mother with her child clutched tightly, trek through the dirt alongside the road to that very stop. He wondered why in the northern section of the Choice City, this mother had no sidewalk beneath her feet. The image gave him pause, and he began asking questions.

"I think sometimes people have blinders on," he said. "As you cross the railroad tracks headed north, there's a hell of a difference. ... It's like things came to a halt 50 years ago."

Dilapidated buildings sit empty, power lines stretch overhead and dirt roads meander through tucked-

square-foot King Soopers. The North College Marketplace project is likely to be the first of a new face-lift for the North College Corridor.
By Erin Frustaci
community.

away neighborhoods and trailer parks. Some would describe the area, which is situated just six blocks from Old Town, as the other Fort Collins – the all-but-forgotten frayed edge of an otherwise vibrant

But big plans are in the works for this tired part of town. And, after years of perseverance with a capital P, the North Fort Collins Business Association and the Urban Renewal Authority will soon see the footprints of the first steps of redevelopment take shape.

With a little imagination, Lautzenheiser envisions a 123,000-square-foot King Soopers supercenter, what he describes as the crown jewel of north Fort Collins’ redevelopment, planted firmly in an existing open field across from Albertsons. He scribbles on a paper napkin where a new technology park could foster innovation and spur job creation on the former Waste Management site and where plans for mixed-use development could bring affordable housing to the area.

Christina Vincent, a Fort Collins city planner whose sole job is to work on the Urban Renewal Authority, said the key in redeveloping North College is to create a distinct identity for the corridor rather than duplicate the Harmony corridor. Though certain traits will link the entire city together, she said its important to keep the clientele in mind. Those coming from Wyoming as opposed to Denver are likely to enter the city through North College.

“Right now, it’s not a gateway. It’s a prelude to Fort Collins,” Vincent said. “We want you to know when you enter Fort Collins.”

The North Fort Collins Business Association, formally the North College Business Association, mobilized to become part of the solution to the blighted area. They met with John Fischbach, City Manager Darrin Atteberry’s predecessor, who recommended the formation of an Urban Renewal Authority.

In December 2004, the City Council approved the North College Urban Renewal Plan, setting the proverbial wheels in motion and freezing the tax base within the district between Vine Drive and Willox Lane. This allowed for Tax Increment Financing, where a portion of property and sales tax from a designated area can be used to help pay for a project or to reimburse developers for a portion of their costs.

Once approved, the Urban Renewal Authority plans have a life span of 25 years. Because of storm water challenges and inadequate infrastructure, Tax Increment Financing offers developers additional incentives to build in a particular area.

Vincent said tax increments are calculated based on the individual projects, but added that the first five or six projects will have to be awarded a substantial amount to get things rolling.

Eric Holsapple, co-owner of Loveland Commercial LLC, said construction on The North College Marketplace could start in April and it could open in the summer of 2010. His company is finalizing the development plans. The new concept King Soopers would be the biggest grocery store in Fort Collins and would also sell small appliances and furniture. In comparison, an average King Soopers is about 65,000 square feet. He said the marketplace will have about 50,000 square feet of additional retail.

“King Soopers has been trying to get something on the north side of Fort Collins for 10 years that I know of,” he said. “It’s been a long-term plan for them. ... We all hope it’s just the start – a catalyst project for what can happen on North College to make it a more vibrant business corridor.”

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Holsapple expects the project to generate \$1.7 million in sales tax and \$800,000 in property taxes each year. He said the project couldn't have happened without the \$8 million in tax increment financing.

Mike Jensen, owner of Urban Development Partners and a broker at Keller Williams, hopes the Urban Renewal Authority board, which is comprised of city council members, will also approve his tax increment financing request March 3 for the proposed Inverness Innovation Park, a technology park that would house Rocky Mountain Innovation Initiative and other technology companies.

He said because there are no sidewalks or curbs and gutters on Vine Drive, he would be required to put them in. Essentially, he will be starting from the bare bones which adds a substantial expense – an expense that the tax increment financing would address. If all goes as planned, Jensen said construction on a 31,000-square-foot building could start this summer. Another three buildings are planned for the site.

Two other projects will also seek approval for the tax breaks at the end of March.

“This is the classic example of taking a blighted area and turning it into something that will add value to the city,” Jensen said. “To use the example of Harmony Road – that whole area from College to Ziegler has changed overnight. I think the next area we will see undergo an overhaul and a face-lift is North College and Vine Drive.”

He said North College Avenue is what links the center of the city to the recreational opportunities of the Poudre Canyon and deserves its own identity. While one could argue the changes are overdo and the area has been neglected too long, North College is on the brink of a new beginning.

“Finally, like a flower you plant in your garden that seems like it will never bloom ... it is finally blooming,” Lautzenheiser said. “When you redevelop a community – when you take a community that has deteriorated for 50 years – and turn it upside down, it’s more than bricks and mortar.”



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