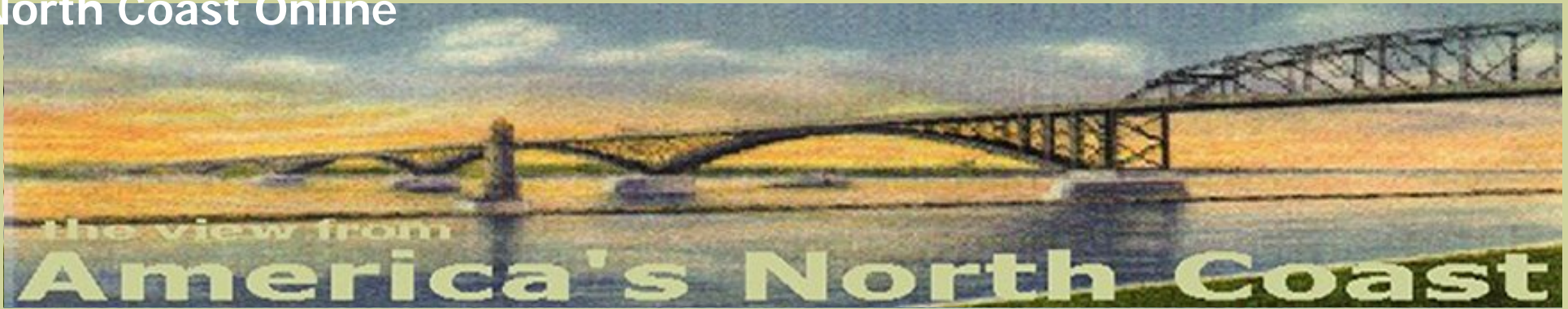
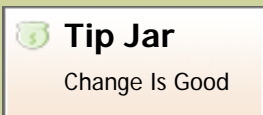
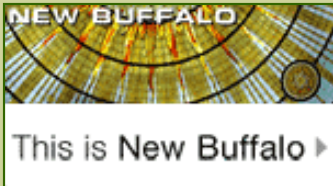


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June 18, 2005

## Fillmore Avenue Restoration

Originally Posted: Saturday, November 30, 2002

**Fillmore Avenue** A good example of a well-intentioned, much-needed, and probably-destined-for failure project showed up in the [Buffalo News](#) Saturday morning: renovating the Fillmore Avenue business district. The paper announced that the effort received a \$25,000 check from Citibank and will be the focus of efforts by UB's Center for Urban Studies to develop a "master plan" for its redevelopment.

The plan will start with the beautification of the area through plantings, banners, and façade improvements. Dr. Henry Louis Taylor, director of UB's Center for Urban Studies said, "We think this economic development project can be an engine for social change in the neighborhood."

Those involved will try to tie the nine-block long business strip to other neighborhood improvements by marketing it as the "Gateway to Martin Luther King, Jr. Park". It's expected that this first phase, beautification and marketing, will take from two to five years.

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I write about this only because it's so typical of what still passes for economic development around here - and don't misunderstand me - I would love to see the East Side come back to life.

What bothers me is the chicken or the egg, cart before the horse nature of the proposal: "using the strip as a tool for rebuilding the neighborhood around it" as they put it. This is to make believe that an economically dead area will come to life because it surrounds a mysteriously attractive and successful shopping district.

Successful shopping districts do not create viable neighborhoods. It's the opposite. The beautiful neighborhoods that line Elmwood Avenue didn't just spring up because there were cute shops and nice restaurants there. Over the years (and it has taken decades) entrepreneurs have opened nicer and more upscale stores and restaurants as the surrounding area grew richer and more diverse.

And when I say diverse, I don't mean racially (although that's ever more the case). The Elmwood district counts lawyers, businesspeople, hippies, rich, not-so-rich, homeowners, renters, and retirees among its number. Not to mention some actors, computer programmers, landscapers, judges, and a mayor.

Throw in a college up the street and you have the recipe for a spectacularly successful regional shopping and entertainment attraction. This sort of diverse population can support a very diverse selection of stores -- it's why we city-dwellers like the city.

Six blocks west from Elmwood lies the Grant-Ferry business area. While a bit downscale (to say the least) from the Elmwood Village, Grant-Ferry remains vibrant and shows signs of renewal. This part of the West Side is truly diverse in the racial and ethnic sense of the word -- much less so economically.

The area has grown steadily poorer as a largely Italian-American middle class has been replaced by Puerto Rican immigrants, a smattering of Southeast Asians, a recent influx of African refugees, and a large number of city residents leaving the collapsing East Side.

The businesses in the area reflect this population. No fancy boutiques here. But there are all the necessities: a large supermarket, a couple banks, hardware

stores, dry cleaners, butcher shops, and the ubiquitous rent-to-own companies. A Foot Locker franchise just opened where the old Woolworth's used to be located, Rainbow shops still sell inexpensive clothing for women, and Guercio and Sons find that Latina housewives like buying fresh produce out on the sidewalk as much as another generation of Italian housewives once did.

The newcomers to Buffalo are creating businesses as well -- cellphone outlets, several homegrown "urban" clothing stores, and barber shops targeted to black men and boys. A large Puerto Rican bakery operates in a building that once housed an Italian pastry shop. Oh yeah, the facades can be pretty shabby -- it doesn't seem to matter to the customers and the owners will spruce them up as business grows.

Elmwood and Grant-Ferry have one feature in common: a large, densely concentrated population living within three or four blocks on both sides of the streets.

Even though poorer than their Elmwood counterparts, the residents surrounding Grant-Ferry have sufficient numbers to support a wide variety of local businesses. The old double houses in this part of the city that provide income to their owners and cheap rent to their tenants perform a third economic function of packing a lot of people into a small area. This isn't overcrowding (too many people per room), this is the definition of a healthy city.

So forget the silly slogans and marketing plans. Marketing something that doesn't exist is either stupid or fraudulent -- maybe both.

These are the factors that proponents of redeveloping Fillmore Avenue should be looking at. How many people live within three or four blocks, what's their ethnic make-up, do they have enough money to spend to support non-subsidized businesses? Can these new businesses find a stable pool of potential employees? And finally, it can't be ignored, can they feel safe shopping there?

So while I wish them well in their endeavor, I'm skeptical. It's fine for Citibank to contribute and it's well and good for UB to become involved (although the Urban Studies Department tends to political correctness). I smell future demands for city money though, and that mustn't happen. Paving the streets, improving the sidewalks, and planting trees are proper city functions, more than that is unfair

and wrong.

All the successful shopping districts in the city have become successful without government plans or money. These things develop spontaneously to fill an expressed need. To wit, Chippewa. Had there been a "master plan" in the eighties to create an entertainment district downtown we'd probably have something about as successful as Crawdaddy's or the Buffalo Brew Pub.

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Tracked on March 15, 2006 at 12:11 AM

## Comments

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And as an urban planning graduate i agree with your comments on city involvement with developing "master plans" for neighborhoods. The city should be an administrator of growth not a facilitate it. As for the UB program I also don't think that the Urban Studies department should be in charge of the program, this is an urban planning issue.

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Posted by: sullymon54 | [June 21, 2006 at 02:46 PM](#)

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