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Section: Local

Using funds for Jefferson makes sense

Rod Watson - NEWS STAFF REPORTER

So the mayor of Buffalo is paying particular attention to the rebirth of the Jefferson Avenue commercial corridor?

There's only one intelligent response to that: Thank goodness somebody is.

A Buffalo News analysis showing that Jefferson has gotten most of one small pot of development money during Byron W. Brown's first term brings reactions as predictable as they are myopic.

No doubt that there are other poor areas in America's third-poorest big city. But no area has as many high-poverty census tracts as the East Side, and no one's waiting around for major corporations, department stores or insurance companies to move in and help change that.

That part of Buffalo will be revived by building on the small businesses already there, the ones that cater to blacks left to cope with the legacy of disinvestment, white flight, "urban renewal" and redlining that combined to affect this community like no other.

"You have to have targeted investment . . . you have to realize the [level of] distress is not the same across the city," said Henry L. Taylor Jr., director of the University at Buffalo's Center for Urban Studies, one of the groups helping the city finally produce a real anti-poverty plan.

In this part of town, that means building on the barbershops, restaurants and clothing stores that exist, not dreaming of some magic bullet.

Taylor noted, for instance, that suburban and West Side blacks -- himself included -- find their way to Jefferson and Fillmore avenues for haircuts, soul food and whatever else they can't find elsewhere. Gigi's Restaurant -- tax problems and all -- is where he takes white friends or UB visitors to

experience African-American cuisine.

"That's what an anchor store does. [It] drives people into the community," he said. They'll spend even more if there are enough other attractions.

But to lure other attractions and develop those corridors, you have to change the way they look by upgrading facades and streetscapes. It all works together.

"Can you imagine the West Side being a vibrant community if the Elmwood strip was as decayed as Fillmore Avenue? It couldn't," he said.

The next step is creating apartments above the businesses, like those that spur vitality and foot traffic in Allentown and along the Elmwood and Hertel strips.

Everyone seems to understand that process when it takes place in other parts of the city.

They understood when millions were spent to revitalize Hertel Avenue, install Main Street medians and landscaping in North Buffalo, and help Elmwood Avenue and Chippewa Street.

No one said that funding should have been pork-barreled into nine equal parts, so that each Common Council member could hold a news conference. And any criticism of mayors looking out for certain neighborhoods was countered by the reality that those efforts benefited the city as a whole.

So does developing Jefferson Avenue. Former Mayor Tony Masiello recognized that in facilitating the new supermarket, library, media center and business incubator there.

To squander those investments by not spending a few thousand dollars to build curb appeal among businesses would be the height of foolishness, guaranteeing the other millions would be wasted.

Encouragingly, even some West Siders recognize this. As one business leader there said of the city money devoted to Jefferson, "You spend it where you need to fix things."

It's a refreshingly visionary attitude in a city not known for such big-picture thinking. Maybe it'll catch on.

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