

TIF AHEAD FOR UNION HILL AREA

Project aims to create new homes, take down blighted buildings, developers say.

By JILL SEDERSTROM
Special to The Star

Plans for the second phase of a redevelopment project in Union Hill are moving forward.

Kansas City Council members recently approved ordinances for the project that will allow developers to fund the project through tax-increment financing.

Jerry Riffel, the Lathrop and Gage attorney representing the project's developer, said the ordinances will allow the project to advance to the last residential stage of the project that will develop about 100 renovated and new single-family housing units.

A portion of the money also will pay for the demolition of several dilapidated buildings in Union Hill to make room for the single-family housing.

"I think it will be a very different look and feel two years from right now, which I am very excited about," said Bob Frye, a principal with the Union Hill Development Group.

The TIF is somewhat unusual in that the money from it will be going to improvements to eliminate blight in the urban core. Proceeds also will go toward



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paying for small-business grants and homeowner grants to help residents pay for improvement projects.

The second phase will be the final component of a redevelopment project that began about a decade ago.

The first phase of the project allowed developers to acquire four of the largest problem properties in the area, as well as pay for several small-business grants and homeowner grants.

Frye also has helped develop new retail, townhouses, apart-

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ments and condominiums in Union Hill.

The second phase of the redevelopment project will give developers money to demolish problem properties they acquired years ago and replace them with single-family houses intended to maintain the neighborhood's character.

"It's critical that we leave things in a state that they are permanently re-developed," Frye said. "That's really what this second bond package does — it anchors the legacy."

The redevelopment plans were formed about 10 years ago after developers held about 20 meetings with residents and business owners to determine an improvement plan.

The group sought to analyze why several areas in the urban core of Union Hill were not being redeveloped despite available tax abatements.

They determined that a num-

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ber of spot zone apartments had been built in the 1960s and 1970s and never properly maintained. These properties were an eyesore and didn't provide many opportunities for developers looking to relocate to the area.

They also identified many older homeowners in the area who weren't able to afford improvements to their properties. They hoped to find a way to help the homeowners pay for the needed improvements.

The group also hoped to find a way to help business owners landscape and make other aesthetic improvements to their properties.

"Those items, if everybody does it, raises the value of the whole area," Frye said.

Once the priorities were identified the group had to determine how it would pay for the improvements.

"TIF really made a lot of sense because our projects were creating a fairly significant increment and we believed if you removed the blight from the core that would even let us do more projects," Frye said.

The final stages of the project are almost under way and Union Hill residents are happy to see it.

"It will be better all the way around," said resident Leonard Graham.

His home is behind one of the apartment buildings that will soon be demolished.

He said the building was

never properly maintained, and he's eager to see it go.

"All in all that's just been kind of a thorn in our side for quite some time," he said.

He believes the improvements throughout Union Hill will motivate current homeowners to invest in their properties. He said the small homeowner grants available through the TIF will be an extra incentive for those homeowners who may have not previously been able to afford the improvements.

"If those two things happen it's clearly going to make the neighborhood a much better place to live," he said.

The latest redevelopment projects will get started as soon as the TIF commission is able to negotiate a contract with the developer and sell the bonds, a process expected to take about six months.

"We'll be very excited when these last pieces come into play," Frye said.