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Housing Market: Strong, but not 'nuts'... maybe

By Dave Thompson
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Work continues on a new home under construction off Hopewell Avenue in Bettendorf. CREDIT DAVE THOMPSON

Griffin Wagner and her husband, Gregory, have a lot of experience when it comes to searching for homes. In fact, she says they have too much experience.

In the past three years, the Eldridge couple have been looking to buy a home. It has been a frustrating journey. They have looked at dozens of homes, and time after time they have been outbid or simply didn't like what they were seeing on the housing market.

"There's a lot of bottom-of-the-barrel homes for sale right now. I think a lot of sellers are taking advantage of the situation because they know it's a sellers' market," said Ms. Wagner, who is a marketing coordinator at Eastern Iowa Community Colleges in Davenport. "Greg and I have done all the right things. ... Everything is just so expensive right now. You see houses that are going to \$350,000, but they need a lot of work and updates. It's still just crazy out there."

The state of the housing market in the Quad Cities continues to be a source of frustration for many people looking to buy a home.

HOUSING PAGE 16

Home-grown leaders seek to revive RI West End's greatness

By Kenda Burrows
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For years studies and plans have been created by well-intentioned outsiders seeking to fix what they believe is broken in Rock Island's once vibrant and historic West End neighborhood.

But despite periodic investment, an overdue rebirth eludes this diverse, economically challenged and marginalized community as its housing base, infrastructure and youth pay the price.

Seeking to change that today is an active, influential and inclusive group of West End community leaders who are working with the City of Rock Island and grant funder Deere & Co. to flip the area's tired old redevelopment script and create a homegrown revitalization plan that will be both effective and sustainable.

After a difficult start that included a forced COVID-19 pause, a reincarnated West End Revitalization process has been making strides in the effort to lift up the area bounded by the Rock Island Parkway on the north and west, 18th Avenue on the south and 15th and 16th

ROCK ISLAND PAGE 16

Railroad overpass part of joint Bettendorf-Riverdale study

By Steve Tappa
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Following a breakfast meeting last year with a railroad vice president, Riverdale Mayor Anthony Heddlesten's mind began steaming toward a solution to a perplexing problem.

After all, his day job involves fixing issues for communities as the chief of the civil and environmental engineering department for the Rock Island District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The challenge for Mr. Heddlesten's tiny town is the same reality now facing every community along the Mississippi River in the Iowa Quad Cities after the approval Wednesday, March 15, by federal regulators of the merger of major railroads Canadian Pacific (CP) and Kansas City Southern (KCS).

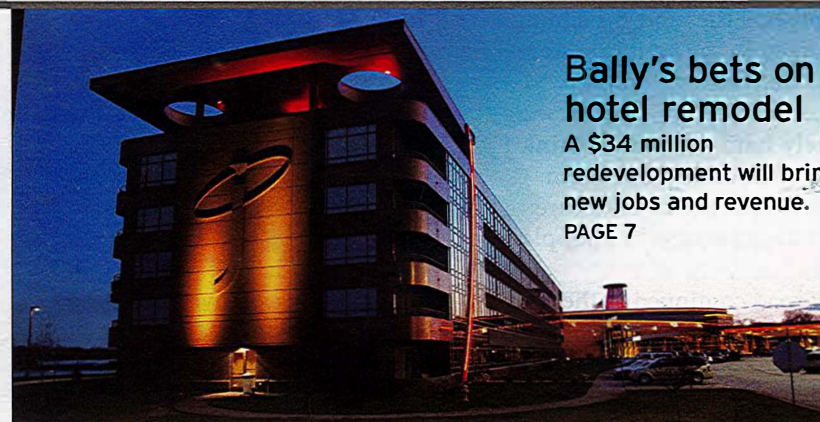
The \$31.6 billion deal – which creates the first single railway running from Canada to Mexico through America's heartland – is expected to triple train traffic to nearly one per hour in the new route's most-affected area in the Iowa Quad Cities. The average train also is projected to double to more than two miles long by 2027.

"The Arconic (aluminum manufacturing) plant is a mile long, so this could be a big problem getting people and products in and out," Mr. Heddlesten said, pointing to his



ANTHONY HEDDLESTEN

RAILROAD PAGE 16



Bally's bets on
hotel remodel
A \$34 million
redevelopment will bring
new jobs and revenue.
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Stakeholders drive RI revitalization plans

ROCK ISLAND FROM PAGE 1

Streets on the east.

Progress so far includes an internal assessment of the area's needs, challenges, assets, barriers and its promise led by a seven-member steering committee of West End residents and supporters. At month's end, that panel also was busy helping 35 West End residents and leaders to launch the working groups critical to the success of the evolving plan.

Their job will be to turn research and planning into action steps centered around this agreed and ambitious vision: "The West End is a preferred place to live and thrive."

They will be guided by these key values, organizers say: justice and equity, inclusion, trust, collaboration, empowerment, respect and communication, and the overall goal will be to "Build the West End community's wealth, power and livability."

Among those convinced that they can make that happen is steering committee member Avery Pearl. "The progress made in the West End project has been excellent," Mr. Pearl told the QCBJ. "In every step of this project community involvement has been the keystone to progression. One of the key findings we've received from the community is that we are reviving the past greatness of the West End; not simply creating something new. The biggest issue in West End Rock Island has been disinvestment, and this project is the solution."

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Strengthen civic capital in the West End.
- Develop and deploy comprehensive, proven racial equity strategies within City of Rock Island government.
- Hire to enhance and model authentic communication, meaningful engagement, and inclusive community leadership.
- Create a locally-run West End Community Development Corporation Strategy and support West End community organizing, advocacy, and engagement strategy.
- Fund participatory budgeting process that focuses on directly engaging historically excluded communities (i.e., West End residents) in selecting investments.
- Build West End residents' assets and incomes.
- Increase housing stability and quality, and community control of land and housing.
- Increase the economic vitality of the West End.
- Improve the infrastructure and visual design of the West End.

West End once bustling

Steering committee member Lynda Sargent grew up in the neighborhood and is pleased to share her passion about it. "I remember the west end neighborhoods as ones where families cared about their homes and their neighbors," she said. "We had grocery stores that we could walk to; at least five different stores. We had a movie theater right where Martin Luther King Jr. Center now stands, and a high-end department store across the street. We had laundromats, bakeries, and every type of business or service available right within our neighborhoods. I long to see the west end section of our city flourish again."

That's a goal shared by Jerry Jones, the executive director of the Rock Island Martin Luther King Jr. Center, which is serving as the backbone for the revitalization plan. He, too, is convinced a community-based path is the right one even if the current process didn't start out that way.

This revitalization effort originally was launched in 2019 when Rock Island Mayor Mike Thoms and other city leaders approached John Deere about investing in the area, Mr. Jones told Rock Island Rotarians at their meeting last month. Deere agreed and a traditional group of planners got to work.

They "came up with a wonderful plan, put it forth and met with pretty good reviews," Mr. Jones said.

But when they presented those findings to their major funder, Mr. Jones said two important questions were posed by Deere: "Are you really dreaming large enough or impactfully enough?" and "Have you really engaged the community in regard to what is needed in this West End community?"

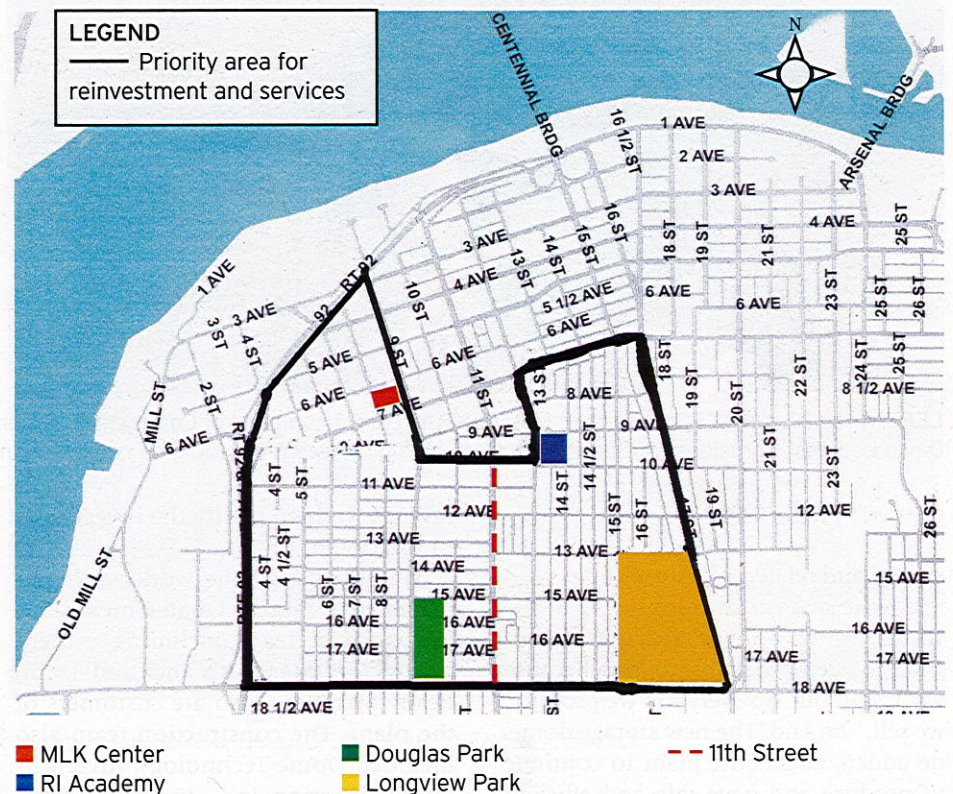
They had not, so Rock Island's Community and Economic Development Department (CED) and the MLK Center began working with community champions to find out what it is like to live in and experience the West End. The result, Mr. Jones said, is "not just a canned survey, but an interactive process brought forth with community champions who really engaged our community to find out what it is really like to be living in the West End."

Residents had a very different story to tell than the ones that had been written by previous reformers. Miles Brainard, Rock Island's community and economic development director, said for example, community members told researchers they were tired of being told what the West End needed rather than being asked about their lives and their challenges.

Time for a different approach

"This is a different approach and a necessary approach than some of the past efforts by the city to do good which, while well intentioned, probably just didn't come at things from the right perspective," Mr. Brainard added. This reboot also allows neighborhoods to lead themselves and ensures experts will

Rock Island's West End



take a back seat to the people with the experience needed to make effective and lasting change.

While there have been investments in the West End, Mr. Jones added, they often tended to "only focus on particular things and they didn't come with a holistic point of view to address the entire issue or even most of the time not even the root causes."

Many times, too, for example, "we think the same cookie-cutter program will work the same for every area and this is simply not true," he said.

Such solutions often failed to address communication and access issues. "Are programs truly accessible and understandable by the people who need them the most?" Mr. Jones asked.

Image matters too, and today's planners point to past plans that have ignored the vibrant community and rich human capital of the West End. Among the things residents wanted in this planning effort was restoration of the name "West End" along with its rich history.

"In the short term, we want to see the West End Rock Island Revitalization plan gain support from partners throughout the Quad Cities," Mr. Pearl said. "We especially want to involve the organizations and community leaders actively fighting to address the disparities within West End Rock Island. Through collective action, we will create a grassroots movement focused on revitalizing the West End community."

He added: "Long term, we will revive the rich history of West End Rock Island, making an overdue, positive, long-lasting, transformational change to its historical and new populations. Once the QC community comes together to enact the West End Revitalization plan, we will see the power of investing in our vulnerable communities. This will birth

numerous urban development projects throughout our community."

Local approach breeds success

Such efforts have worked elsewhere. Mr. Pearl said he got involved with the West End Revitalization when – through his work with the TMBC Lincoln Center in Davenport and the QC Empowerment Network – he attended an Omaha Empowerment Network conference. There, he said, he learned that over a decade local leaders "changed north Omaha from one of Omaha's most vulnerable communities to one of their most preferred places to live and thrive."

There is every reason to believe that can be accomplished in the West End, he said.

"I want the entire QC community to understand that our urban communities are not liabilities, they are assets," Mr. Pearl said. "When we invest in our vulnerable communities, we realize the rich potential of the people that live in these areas, and the entire Quad Cities benefits socially, politically, and economically. The effects of this can be seen in the success of the Floreciente community in Moline, and the Mercado on Fifth celebration."

Maria Ontiveros, Mercado on Fifth's president and co-founder, also sees the parallel between the West End planning effort in Rock Island and the one conducted in Moline's Floreciente neighborhood that led to a host of improvements, investments and celebrations including the Mercado outdoor summer marketplace.

"The John Deere Foundation, through their support of Global Communities, was a huge help to Mercado on Fifth in our early stages," Ms. Ontiveros told the QCBJ. "GC staff assisted aspiring entrepreneurs through the process of starting a business in Illinois, they led strategic planning sessions and

board development, and even provided Mercado on Fifth with the funds to purchase our first tables, chairs and tents."

There's a lot of work to be done in the West End, organizers say. Challenges, barriers and disparities include a high rate of disconnected youth; lower home values; limited access to healthy food and other amenities and services; historically low economic security; under-performing schools; higher rates of (severe) housing cost burden and other housing problems and poor infrastructure.

The area also suffers from a lack of civic capital marked by the inability to access the democratic process. Not knowing who to call or how makes it hard to get potholes fixed or access to programs and funding or to make systemic changes, Mr. Jones said.

Area's assets are its people, nonprofits

Against those challenges, the West End also boasts critical assets that include: City of Rock Island investment and programs, historic Douglas Park, social capital including a strong, active group of trusted community leaders and organizations such as the MLK Center, Rock Island schools, Skip-A-Long, the YWCA and the YMCA already at work in the West End.

While West End Revitalization leaders are shooting for some "quick observable wins" in the days ahead, Mr. Jones and others emphasized that reformers know this revitalization effort is "not going to happen in the snap of a finger."

"These ideas are bold, bold, bold and not easily accomplished and it's not unusual for any place in the United States to have these goals for a particular area," Mr. Jones told the Rotarians. "So how do we do something differently to reach these goals?"

"This will grow beyond the working groups," Mr. Jones added. "This will truly and, if it's ultimately realized, be engaging the community in one of the truest grassroots efforts that you can see and hopefully spread beyond the city of Rock Island as well."

Rock Island development leaders share that hope. "We did want to be a model and we wanted to show how in a place like the Quad Cities that this work is necessary, can actually yield positive results and can be replicated," Mr. Brainard said. That's because when "looking around at all the older parts of the QC you have minority populations who aren't well resourced and need revitalization."

Local leaders also believe that this effort will prove to be more lasting than past revitalization projects. That includes reformers who took part in prior failed revitalization efforts.

"I was a part of another committee several years ago that was also working on the same goal of revitalization of the west end neighborhoods," Ms. Sargent said. "We met for almost a year and formed a plan that was put together in a binder to present to the city leaders. I still have a copy of that proposal that was to be presented."

"To this day, I am not sure why nothing happened with all the investment of time that was made," she added. The work also included organizers printing flyers, going door-to-door and meeting with neighbors at a west end church.

Still, she said, she's not discouraged. "I believe with all of my heart that this time, we will see our west end neighborhoods flourish again!" QCBJ

"I remember the west end neighborhoods as ones where families cared about their homes and their neighbors. We had grocery stores that we could walk to; at least five different stores. We had a movie theater right where Martin Luther King Jr. Center now stands, and a high-end department store across the street. We had laundromats, bakeries, and every type of business or service available right within our neighborhoods. I long to see the west end section of our city flourish again."

- LYNDA SARGENT, WEST END STEERING COMMITTEE

West End Steering Committee:



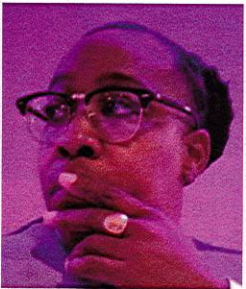
Isaac Carr - owner of Trucker NIC Logistics & Events Decor LLC and a member of the Quad Cities Alliance for Immigrants & Refugees; organizer of the Quad Cities World Soccer Tournament; QC Liberian Community; and current national vice president of Grand Gedeh Association in the Americas' Inc.



Vanessa Taylor - Rock Island High School educator for 31 years, chapter leader for Royal Neighbors of America, and founder of FAIR Chance (Families Achieving Independently and Responsibly).



Avery Pearl - Assistant director of the TMBC Lincoln Resource Center and a member of the QC Empowerment Network.



Tee LeShoure - Director of community violence intervention and engagement for Family Resources and president of QC PRIDE INC.



Lynda Sargent - Founder, president and CEO of Heart of Hope Ministries; and member of the Rock Island County NAACP; Faith & Blue, made up of ministry leaders and area police chiefs; and the Quad Cities Open Network.



Marisa Cantu - Community education marketing advocate for the Illinois Iowa Center for Independent Living; Community Caring Conference Board of Directors, and member of the NAACP, LULAC and the QC Council on Community Services.



Rita Jett - Behavioral interventionist for the Rock Island/Milan School District, member of FAIR Chance and Soles for Children, and a Royal Neighbors chapter leader.

Why neighborhood rebirth matters to Deere, QC business community

By Kenda Burrows

kenda@quadcitiesbusiness.com

John Deere is increasingly making the sustainable revitalization of diverse neighborhoods including Rock Island's West End and Moline's Florenciente neighborhood its business.

And the Moline-based global equipment manufacturer is not alone in supporting both Florenciente's successful Mercado on Fifth story and the one now being written in Rock Island's West End.

Among them is Quad Cities Chamber CEO LaDrina Wilson. "The vibrancy of the West End of Rock Island of the '70s is lost on the present generation," she said. "We've gone an entire generation without a lot of investment in this area and I'm glad to see public and private partnerships happening at a grassroots level to support the advancement of this neighborhood."

Ms. Wilson added: "Communities that focus on inclusive economies are communities that win. The chamber supports the advancement of entrepreneurship and localized efforts that center on appropriate representation of the community members that live in and have grown up on the West End. This is important work and we stand ready to complement any efforts that result from this study."

The area also boasts nearby corporate neighbors, including Crawford Co., that support the process.

"While our location on Mill Street is outside of the revitalization zone, Crawford and our employees would certainly feel the positive impact of this effort," company owner Ian Frink told the QCBJ. "We hope with this effort to see businesses, large and small, prosper in downtown Rock Island."

"More places to do business, shop and eat are all benefits for our company, and specifically our employees," he added. "It also impacts those of our employees that live in Rock Island. We also like the plan to beautify the area, and make certain areas more pedestrian friendly. By creating more accessible attractions, we hope to see more visitors to Rock Island, and the downtown corridor."

When neighborhoods succeed, the region benefits, said Visit Quad Cities President and CEO Dave Herrell.

"Neighborhoods within the Quad Cities region are what help us stand out from an authenticity perspective," he said. "Our Tourism Master Plan contemplates fostering neighborhood personality, character, and identity to generate more diverse and clustered cultural products. Rock Island has an incredible opportunity to activate and leverage the West End revitalization to create more value for residents and area businesses."

So far, the ongoing West End effort has received \$150,000 over two years from John Deere and is expected to get another \$65,000 boost, according to Nate Clark, president of the John Deere Foundation, Deere & Co.'s philanthropic arm.

That funding is critical to helping to ensure that the West End plan succeeds, local organizers say. Take Lynda

Sargent, a member of the steering committee seeking to turn around the area. She told the QCBJ, "If John Deere is on board with our city leadership to make this happen, I believe it will happen."

Her "heart leapt," she added, when she first heard that Deere had asked the two key questions which ultimately launched the current community-based approach to the west-end planning effort: "Are you dreaming BIG enough," and "Do you have the right people in the community engaged to make it happen?"

John Deere has worked for years to help lift up global partner communities, but even before COVID-19 hit, Mr. Clark said it realized that across the region "there were cities and especially neighborhoods that had been sort of left behind. What I mean by that is that from a business or philanthropic standpoint investments weren't being made in those parts of the region."

"We all know where they are," he added. "We all know where poverty strikes families the hardest. We know where hunger strikes families, where there are barriers to success."

As the company began to look locally, its focus, Mr. Clark said, was to ensure with the investments it made that "no one in our home communities is left behind."

He pointed, for example, to the "great experience" Deere had in assisting Moline and the Global Communities nonprofit organization to boost the Florenciente neighborhood. "That was an effort on our part to bring in the experts to understand the needs of a community, and to put the community members in the lead for actually selecting the approaches they thought would be most empowering to them," he said.

That locally captained effort continues to pay dividends in this vibrant largely Hispanic economically challenged neighborhood through such things as job development, training, education and Mercado on Fifth's outdoor summer marketplace.

Deere's involvement in Rock Island began in 2019 when city leaders approached the Moline-based corporation seeking support for its latest effort to revitalize the West End. The pandemic and that plan's reboot slowed progress for a time, but these days Mr. Clark is high on current progress and on the Rock Island Martin Luther King Jr. Center executive director who has shepherded the effort from the start.

"I can't say enough about the importance of Jerry Jones to this project," Mr. Clark said. "Jerry is one of the most well respected and connected nonprofit leaders in the community, so whenever there is a project involving Jerry you know it's going to be a good one."

Stakeholder involvement is central to Deere's sustainable community assistance.

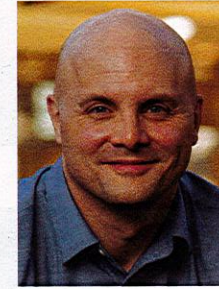
"It is a core tenet of good, global, sustainable development that any intervention, any plan like this needs to have buy-in from the people who will ultimately own and be responsible and benefit from it," Mr. Clark added.

"You'll often find that people will



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- LADRINA WILSON, CEO OF QUAD CITIES CHAMBER OF COMMERCE



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- NATE CLARK, PRESIDENT OF THE JOHN DEERE FOUNDATION



"Rock Island has an incredible opportunity to activate and leverage the West End revitalization to create more value for residents and area businesses."

- DAVE HERRELL, PRESIDENT/CEO OF VISIT QUAD CITIES

come in and they'll identify solutions that they try to bring into the community without actually asking the community what their vision of the future is; what their hopes are," Mr. Clark said.

That's not happening in Rock Island and as a result, he said, "I believe that this program will be a success because it's centered on the lives of those who live there."

It's also important to give the project enough time so that all voices are heard, Mr. Clark said, adding "Oftentimes, we feel like there might be a silver bullet or two but that's not the nature of sustainable development."

Broad and long experience in sustainability is another thing Mr. Clark said Deere brings to the table. "We're a 200-year-old company essentially and we know that growth and progress and prosperity cannot be solved in a quarter or a year," he said. "It's something that is earned and developed over decades and in our case centuries, so we want to show our communities that we're in it for the long haul and programs like this that allow people to have a voice and to come to the project on their terms."

He also said it's important to replace the power dynamic when marginalized groups are concerned. "One of the worst things you can do in investment is to

tell an organization that they can only spend a certain percentage to get important work done, like pay your staff," Mr. Clark said.

"When we make investments like this it shows we want to earn the trust of organizations by investing in ways that matter," he added. "When Jerry says that means something community-centered, stakeholder-centered, we believe him. We want to earn his trust and we want to earn the Rock Island community's trust that we're investing in them."

In addition to local leaders, the West End also is fortunate to have exceptional nonprofit organizations working there, he said, for example, the MLK, YMCA, YWCA, Skip-A-Long, Spring Forward, Rock Island-Milan schools and more.

Mr. Clark also praised community funders and singled out the Doris & Victor Day Foundation under the direction of Tyla Sherwin-Cole. "She has helped to shine a light for other donors in the community about the importance of Rock Island," Mr. Clark said.

As a result, he said, "in addition to having great nonprofits, and an extraordinary and wonderful community you now have people who are willing in a long overdue way to invest in the community so that it isn't left behind." QCBJ