


Urban Times ARCHIVES

This document contains these stories from past issues of Urban Times:

❑ FROM: OCTOBER 2006

Page 2: FOCUS Program tackles
once-thriving commercial corridors

There is no shortage of “For Lease” signs along North Meridian Street, although the corridor does serve as home to a number of not-for-profit organizations and other non-retail enterprises.



From October 2006:

With two more corridors, FOCUS continues to chip away at decay

ONCE UPON A TIME IN Indianapolis, the stretch of North Meridian Street south of Fall Creek was a shiny, bustling example of the city's vitality.

Once, but not now.

The same is said for the stretch of Washington Street that passes through Irvington. The vitality has waned, but the hope of local stakeholders has not.

Enter the Local Initiatives Support Corp., which drives an initiative called FOCUS, in partnership with the City of Indianapolis, the Greater Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce and the Indianapolis Coalition for Neighborhood Development.

FOCUS – an acronym for “Fostering Commercial Urban Strategies” – is not new to these pages, where reports have appeared on the 16th Street corridor, a stretch that borders on both the Old Northside and Herron-Morton Place neighborhoods.

There has been no magical resurgence of the 16th Street corridor, nor is the work nearly completed in each of the other areas that previously joined the FOCUS fold: Fountain Square, East 10th Street, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Street and West Washington Street.

“This is definitely a marathon,” said LISC’s Bill Taft, “But, you can track your times mile by mile,” he continued, noting that the successes are “very individual. To fundamentally shift the market takes years.”

FOCUS has long-term goals, of course, but the keys to success lie in the short-term efforts which are measured quarterly. And even if a quick drive through any of these corridors would unveil little dramatic change, the change is there nevertheless.

Last year, for example, the FOCUS initiative within the five corridors assisted over 100 businesses, renovated 20 facades, attracted 31 new businesses to the corridors, helped to create 52 new jobs, held over 100 different promotional events, cleaned up five contami-

nated sites, and improved 12 green spaces, among many other activities.

The façade program has directly leveraged \$140,000 in matching investment from private businesses. In 2006, the façade program intends to invest more than \$200,000 to assist 20 neighborhood business owners in renovating the facades of their building.

The FOCUS initiative, however, is not about strangers swooping in to save beleaguered districts. Success depends largely upon the energy and commitment of local stakeholders. Campaigns, he agreed, live or die on that local commitment. The most successful corridors, he said, enjoy “strong pressure to make things happen.”

Such as the East 10th Street corridor, where Taft praised “a great group of volunteers.” Working with staff provided by the FOCUS initiative, “we’re starting to see tangible results.”

Staff is a key element of the FOCUS initiative. Taft cites the Irvington area as an example. Good progress has been made by the volunteer efforts in place, but the lack of at least one full-time staff member has been a constant roadblock to getting certain

things done.

The 16th Street corridor, for example, has been served by Amandula Henry, who worked part-time in corridor issues from her office with the Near North Development Corp. Henry has now been moved to Irvington to work on that corridor full-time. Her yet-to-be-hired successor will work exclusively on corridor issues, splitting time between 16th Street and Meridian Street.

The effort has the strong support of Mayor Bart Peterson.

“This type of neighborhood-based economic development is key to a strong, local economy and a high quality of life in our community,” Peterson said when the latest two corridors were announced. “The revital-



**This is definitely a marathon.
But you can track your times
mile by mile.”**

**Bill Taft
Local Initiatives Support Corp.**

ization efforts focused on these commercial corridors means new jobs, businesses and investment for neighborhoods that need it.”

The newly targeted Meridian Street corridor already has one “win,” Peterson said when he helped unveil the latest FOCUS expansion. As previously reported in Urban Times, the popular Side Street Deli is relocating from its Illinois Street home to 2330 N. Meridian St. With an investment of nearly \$1.5 million, the restaurant will add an outdoor patio area and begin offering banquet space and conference services.

Such are the victories measured through the FOCUS program. Similar boosts can be itemized in each of the corridors – but Taft harbors no illusions about the task ahead. He agrees with the observation that the corridors slipped into decline over a period of decades, and reversing that trend won’t happen overnight.

“Even places we’ve been at for years,” he said, “we still have a long way to go.”

– Bill Brooks

THE TOOL KIT

What does a district get through the FOCUS initiative? FOCUS provides the following “tools” to help the commercial corridor staff and neighborhood organizations:

❑ **Façade Improvement Grants** – Matching grants to business owners willing to renovate the exterior of their buildings.

❑ **Small Business Loan Fund** – This fund provides alternative financing to small businesses unable to find financing from conventional sources.

❑ **Brownfield Redevelopment Fund** – This partnership with the City of Indianapolis offers small grants to nonprofit developers and low interest loans to for-profit developers to remove contaminants on potentially developable sites.

❑ **Indy Site Finder** – This website - www.indysitefinder.com - is a unique tool that provides the latest demographic and market data, aerial photos, and lists commercial properties for sale or lease.

❑ **Strategic Acquisitions Fund** – This fund offers community development corporations and other neighborhood-based organizations with flexible funding to speculatively acquire strategically located sites.

❑ **Urban Economic Development Guide** – This is a “how-to” guide for developing commercial properties in urban areas, with information such as case studies, legal and business templates, potential resources and contacts, and project planning.

❑ **Commercial Development Consultant** – FOCUS provides access to an experienced commercial real estate developer to help guide small business owners through the real estate development process.

❑ **Technical Assistance Program** — This program gives community development corporations and others small grants to hire expertise (architects, developers, financial consultants, etc.) to help them develop commercial property.

For a parcel-by-parcel analysis of the corridors and for more information about the commercial corridor program, visit the FOCUS website at www.focusindy.com. ■
