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East Franklinton plots a creative comeback

City, developers see area west of Downtown as possible magnet for artists, business



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Mike Brown spruces up a home in East Franklinton. Although hurdles remain, the neighborhood is undergoing a rebirth.

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By **Mark Ferenchik**

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East Franklinton boosters say the community is coming back, attracting artists and ultimately more of the creative class that cities desperately seek to boost neighborhoods. Signs of progress are there across the Scioto River from Downtown — a growing artists’ colony, new businesses, plans for new housing.

But reminders of the hurdles the neighborhood still must overcome remain visible. One afternoon this month, four police cruisers clustered around a car at the intersection of Town and McDowell streets. Columbus officers talked to the two people in the car, which had been reported stolen on the city’s North Side.

Watching from the corner were Jim Sweeney and Jeff Mohrman of the Franklinton Development Association. The group’s new headquarters is located there.

They know that scenes involving stolen cars, drugs and other crimes feed a perception that Franklinton is unsafe. They are among those trying to create a new image for part of the neighborhood once known as the Bottoms.

What better way than to make a mark themselves? The association’s headquarters used to be a corner store that was a magnet for “an open-air drug market,” Sweeney said.

The store closed more than a year ago after the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority shuttered and razed the nearby Riverside Bradley public-housing complex.

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“The goal was to get control of the property,” said Sweeney, the association’s executive director. “We are hoping to encourage other property owners to redevelop.”

The city of Columbus is doing its part. This year, city officials unveiled a plan to redevelop the area, which is pocked with vacant lots and old industrial buildings. The 20-year plan includes an arts-and-innovation district in the southeastern part of the neighborhood. The idea is to attract artists and high-tech manufacturers to old warehouses. City officials say they also anticipate as many as 4,400 new or rehabilitated homes.

The Columbus City Council also recently approved an agreement to use property taxes from new nonresidential development for public improvements, including roads and water and sewer lines to help attract developers to the area. None of that would have been possible without the \$134 million Franklinton floodwall, which took 11 years to build and was dedicated in 2004.

“It creates an environment where development can occur safely,” said Stephen Kearney, senior planner for Boston-based Goody Clancy, which created the East Franklinton plan for the city. “You can get financing with the floodwall in place.”

That’s the theory, anyway. The recession dried up much of that. Developer Lance Robbins said he is still trying to line up financing for a \$6 million project that includes 67 loft apartments.

And plans to open a 10,000-square-foot restaurant and bar at 401 W. Town St. have been pushed back to next spring so they can be redesigned to meet state building requirements, said Chris Sherman, Robbins’ project manager.

Another bar will open sooner. Brad DeHays is developing a new place on Town Street at the site of the old Three Deuces bar. He said he hopes to open the “extremely clean dive bar” by December. He’s calling it the Rehab Tavern. “Everyone keeps talking about a rebirth,” DeHays said of East Franklinton.

“We’re not expecting it to blow out of the water the first year or two,” he said. “We hope to grow it into a staple for the neighborhood.”

Around the corner on McDowell Street, Tommy Kolikonovski is rehabilitating a home he’ll soon move into. He said he heard the area had potential, and after renting in German Village, he decided to move into the house his dad owned as a rental property.

“We put in new floors, gutted the kitchen — pretty much everything,” said Kolikonovski, who works with his father in home and commercial maintenance. Nearby, the 400 West Rich building, with 50 artists now renting space, has garnered a lot of attention. One end of the building features the Dinin’ Hall, a rotating group of food trucks that congregate there through the week. East Franklinton’s location should be a plus for development, Kearney said. Walking from East Franklinton to Downtown takes 10 minutes.

When the \$32 million Rich Street bridge opened in July, connecting Franklinton to Downtown, Ken Mollica put up a sign on a boarded-up vacant Town Street house he owns in East Franklinton.

The sign, reminiscent of one Las Vegas visitors see, says, “Welcome to Fabulous Franklinton, Ohio.”

“It was just for fun, to draw attention to the neighborhood,” said Mollica, who owns eight properties in the area. He calls his work there “the rich, slow project I’m working on.”

But Mollica is betting it will pay off. “I always thought this neighborhood was too close to Downtown not to be good.”

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