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Fairview eyes TIF to revive Lincoln Trail

Targeted area would run from Illinois 159 to Bunkum Road

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Diana Rich, who lives near a 162-acre proposed tax increment financing district, has watched the area's slow deterioration.

Rich, the 66-year-old mother of Ward 5 Alderman Scott Rich, has lived at 105 St. Clair Drive for 41 years.

"I don't know exactly where the turning point was," she said. "It's just been such a gradual thing, that it's like one day you wake up and it's like, 'Oh, my, I didn't know it had gotten this bad in some of the buildings.'"

The proposed \$4.4 million financing district, called the Lincoln Trail Redevelopment Project Area, would include the Lincoln Trail corridor between Illinois 159 and Bunkum Road, which includes what a feasibility study called dilapidated, deteriorating, and vacant properties.

The money from the district would help pay for infrastructure improvements that city leaders hope will accommodate and attract new development to the area, which some say needs to catch up to development on the eastern end of the city.

According to the feasibility study, up to nine inhabited homes may be displaced as a result of the tax incentive district.

Ward 1 Alderman Gil Klein's business, Klein's Brand Source at 10338 Lincoln Trail, is included in the proposed district. He said property taxes are too high for the area, and that may contribute to the businesses closing and a lack of further development. He said people can't afford to pay taxes on decaying buildings, and the properties are difficult to sell.

School and fire officials oppose the tax increment financing proposal because it would freeze their tax income at its current level, which they say could hinder future services. Some residents, however, think the financing could be a boon to the entire city.

Sina Ghatan, 60, rents out the house he owns at 11 Pine Trail, which is adjacent to the proposed area. He thinks more businesses and better infrastructure will raise his property value and provide for better tenants.

"From what I have seen, is that controlled expansion ... is good for the growth of the city," Ghatan said.

To those who don't support the idea of a frozen tax income, Ghatan said the financing is "give and take," and that it's an "advantage for everybody ... the TIF will be catching up on taxes later on."

Willis Wright, 36, lives at 11 Pleasant Lane, which is included in the proposed area. He hopes a financing district would keep out crime that may come with commercial abandonment.

"Everybody keeps their property up, but if they don't do anything on this side of town, what's going to happen is a lot of people who've been here for years are going to move away. Property value is going to go down," Wright said. "When property value goes down, you have crime, you have drugs, you have prostitution. ... If you don't get this part of town built up, it's going to affect the rest of Fairview."

Wright thinks new development could eliminate that possibility in the area, which he said doesn't yet have a crime problem.

Rich, Klein, and Wright are all skeptical as to whether \$4.4 million alone will cure deterioration on the west end of Lincoln Trail.

"I support the TIF, but is it enough to eliminate the eyesores?" Wright said.

Pratt said the city set an "affordable" amount of money for the proposal in order to gain cooperation of the taxing districts, including the school districts and fire district. Those agencies have now recommended the City Council not vote for the tax incentive district. Tolliver said that if the City Council approved the district, the city could later go through the same approval procedures to increase the funding.

Rich worries that more of the district's money would be allotted to aid infrastructure for big businesses and that there may be little left for small businesses, which she said would keep them from thriving.

Brian Pratt, director of urban consulting at PGAV, a St. Louis company that completed the feasibility study for the city, said the \$4.4 million includes money to improve infrastructure for all kinds of developments.

He said the district could be one part of a city effort to improve that area.

"This is one tool in the toolbox, but without this tool, the city doesn't have much of a toolbox," Pratt said.

The City Council must decide on the proposal by 90 days after the public hearing, which started Wednesday and is scheduled to resume August 21. The Finance Committee will discuss the proposal at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday.

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