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East Side plans need sensitivity

- Scott Stroud

A peculiar exchange unfolded a few weeks ago in City Councilwoman Ivy Taylor's office when Realtor Gordon Deering came to her about a development idea he was pushing for the city's East Side.

Deering was involved in a private effort to re-envision the area between Nolan and Iowa Streets, from the Alamodome east to New Braunfels Avenue. Basing his pitch on a Lubbock success story called Overton Park, he wanted to level existing property in the area and replace it with a cohesive mix of apartments, single-family homes and commercial development.

Taylor, who represents the area and lives on Olive Street, had read some articles about the dramatic facelift given to the rundown area between downtown Lubbock and Texas Tech University. Deering wasn't far into his plan for something similar here when she realized they had a problem.

"He took out a map and he started out saying, well, this Dignowity Hill area, it has a historic designation, but he said, really there's maybe a couple of houses that are worth saving," Taylor recalled.

She pointed to an imaginary map and laughed.

"Right in the area where he was saying there was nothing worth saving, I was like 'Well, I happen to live right here and I beg to differ.'"

The exchange goes to the heart of the challenge emerging from the East Side Development Reinvestment Summit, which concluded last weekend with a sense that something might finally happen. For the promise to be fully realized, that energy must be harnessed in a way that attracts developers but doesn't lose touch with folks in the community — who were there first, after all.

At the end of Saturday's summit meeting, participants were asked for ideas about what should happen next. As many as half talked in some way about the need for ongoing dialogue, a reflection of the East Side's long history of having to bend to the will of the city's fathers.

So developers with ideas must be part of the process, but they'll need to listen, too. Along those lines, Deering attended all three summit meetings, and I suspect he learned some things. The need to save more of the stately old homes in Dignowity Hill, for starters.

Whether that moves some adapted version of his Lubbock plan to the forefront depends on people like Taylor, who has a healthy sense that big visions can be part of the process if they're sensitive to the community and don't gum things up. She wants action now: large, small, and in between.

Reinforcing the need to act quickly, City Manager Sheryl Sculley answered concerns raised at the first summit by announcing new plans to step up city code enforcement and pick up more stray animals on the East Side. She also said 24 new officers would try to put a dent in prostitution and drug trafficking.

Those efforts must be handled with care, and Sculley seemed to sense that when she volunteered that the reassigned officers would take a “community-oriented policing approach.”

But bringing real economic recovery to the area needs to involve a community-oriented development approach. Before you do anything else, you have to recognize what's valuable by checking with the people who value it.

That's how you figure out what's worth saving.

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