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Hopefuls target E. 10th for rebirth

Community group sees hope in small projects

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Within 10 years, Tammi Hughes hopes to drive by budding local stores that offer furniture, arts and antiques on her way to work. She'd like to stop in at a local cof-

feehouse or grab a paper at an eclectic corner bookstore.

That's the vision for Hughes and a group of people working on spurring a turnaround for a commercial corridor on East 10th Street that stretches from just west of Rural Street to just west of Sherman Drive.

Right now, though, there's work to be done to get there. While it was once an active retail stretch, the corridor has declined and has several empty and rundown storefronts.

While East 10th Street, and the city as a whole, fight an increase in crime, there are some promising signs, including the work of Hughes' group, which was years in the making before it formally incorporated in 2001 as the 10th Street Civic Association.

"We didn't have an established community development corporation over here," said Hughes, the association's executive director, adding that the group is helping to unite the neighborhood.

The association, through a targeted retail corridor program, helped bring in grants of \$161,000 in 2005 to buy and tear down dilapidated buildings, renovate others, and spruce up storefronts.

One of the first projects it took on was buying the

Mayfair Building at 2032 E. 10th St. from a Canada-based corporation that buys debt-ridden properties. The unsecured property had been vacant for years and was the site of numerous break-ins. City officials signed an order to raze the building, but reversed course when approached about purchasing it.

The association then sold the building in August 2005 to a couple—James and Kimberly Smith—who want to rehab it and put in two businesses downstairs and a living area upstairs. They purchased the property by paying off overdue back taxes.

James Smith is doing much of the rehab work himself and said he hopes to have his hardware and computer software fix-it firm, DataSmith Technologies Inc., set up by the end of the year and then open a coffee shop by the end of 2007.

The association helped with the first phase of façade improvement. Portions of the house's exterior are worn, showing the work yet to be done.

Smith, who now rents space in the neighborhood, considered buying an office elsewhere but ended up purchasing the house because he wanted a property he could buy outright.

"It became apparent very quickly that I can't afford a commercial property in most areas," he said. "I thought: I need something I can work on, an ugly building that has potential."

The former site of Mustang Sally's, a biker bar, was in terrible condition.

"A lot of flaws that everybody was pointing out didn't matter because they didn't see what I saw in it," Smith said.

The property's location on the verge of downtown was what sealed the deal, he



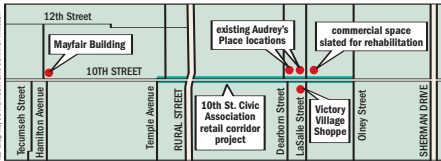
Aleks Gifford of Victory Inner-City Ministries has confidence in East 10th Street.

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Victory Inner-City Ministries has high hopes for its furniture shop and art gallery.



said, because he expects the urban renewal taking place on Massachusetts Avenue will eventually spread east of Interstate 65 and reach the East 10th Street corridor.

He said people who stroll through Woodruff Place to admire the architecture could someday visit a revitalized East 10th Street to get some coffee and shop.

While the work is moving forward, Smith has had setbacks. Thieves after scrap metal stole aluminum siding off the building and destroyed air-conditioning units to get copper.

"I've adapted and overcome," he said, adding that new security measures are preventing losses.

East of Smith, the association also purchased a vacant commercial building at 2807 E. 10th St. and sold it to the Englewood Community Development Center. Rehab efforts recently started on the building, which will be split and marketed—1,000 square feet for a store and an equal space for offices.

At 3109 E. 10th St., the group purchased two vacant buildings known as popular locations for drug deals and tore them down. The association began marketing the land this month, hoping to lure a developer to build a two-story retail project.

The group has also been helping spruce up the neighborhood by working with existing businesses on façade improvements, such as longtime area businessman John Britain, who co-owns two fur-

niture shops—one with used and antique furniture and another with new furniture.

Britain landed a \$15,000 grant to remake a warehouse into 10,000 square feet of curbside commercial space to lease. Work is set to start in September.

Between upgrades to his two businesses and the warehouse transformation, Britain and his business partner will invest \$75,000 in improvements.

While he's been running Audrey's Place, the name of the older furniture store, for 16 years, he said the neighborhood has good and bad points. He cited its high population density and location as selling points, but said crime—mostly drugs and prostitution—is at an all-time high.

"A lot of people are deterred because of the area's reputation," he said. But there are also positive changes, he said.

"Businesses have come together a bit more and the civic association and the city are putting more money into the area," he said.

Two major construction projects—the expansion of a community center and a new school building—have brought more activity.

"I want just a nice, safe neighborhood with shops that support the residential area," he said.

Across from Britain's shop, another used-furniture shop and art gallery is expected to open soon—this one backed by a subsidiary of Victory Inner-City Ministries Inc.

There, Aleks Gifford and others have been working in stifling heat on a \$20,000 project to gut and renovate the first floor and basement. They're renting the space from the landlord, who is renovating the upstairs for apartment rentals.

Victory is a Christian group that started meeting in a local park and then moved to a local church. Made up of many graduates of Union Bible College in Westfield, it tries to bring its message of faith to people by working and living in struggling areas and setting up programs to help people on a path to self-sufficiency.

Gifford will run the store, which is set up as a separate subsidiary of Victory. He hopes to open by the end of August and eventually partner with other organizations to offer GED and college-level business

classes in the basement.

The hope is to get women involved with the religious group jobs, especially if they're having a hard time getting employment elsewhere because of a criminal history.

Gifford also wants to sell artwork on consignment with small commissions ranging from 10 percent to 20 percent, which compares with an average of 50 percent at traditional galleries. He said he plans to offer classes to help artists learn marketing skills.

"We want to permanently change someone's situation for the better," he said. "The best way we can do something is to start on our own corner."

He said he hopes the neighborhood will grow and change internally.

"Most corridor projects become a way of spreading gentrification," he said. "We want the people in the neighborhood to still be here and to be able to afford the changes."

Backers hope the retail corridor will get another burst of momentum from a recent city designation of a nearby neighborhood as a tax-increment financing district. There locally generated tax funds can go directly back into housing projects and sidewalk and infrastructure improvements in the larger neighborhood.

Even those most actively working for change realize it's a long path ahead.

"If we didn't have faith in the area, we'd pack up our marbles and move elsewhere," Britain said.



A former biker bar has been remodeled into the home of two new businesses.

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