

Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center Director Jerry Jones addressed Council regarding an update to the West End Assessment. He noted that going forward it would be known as the West End Renaissance, and would be providing a high-level overview of where the assessment has been, where it is, and where it is going.

Mr. Jones first reviewed the history of the assessment dating back to 2019. John Deere initially approached the City about making an investment for a significant long-term impact. He said John Deere asked if the project was big enough, and how much data was being received, and noted that their questioning was appreciated. He said at the time, there had not been enough community input about what should be done going forward. Engaging citizens as a part of the assessment was a goal of John Deere and Council, during the creation, implementation, and analysis of it. This made the assessment an inclusive and equitable process. He noted that the COVID-19 pandemic halted the process by a year in 2020, but resumed in March of 2021 with assessment of the assets in the community. This also consisted of developing a holistic, broad-based approach to gain feedback from citizens, and in September 2021 Mr. Jones reported the results of the assessment back to Council. In January of 2022, Council was notified that John Deere was willing to fund the efforts moving forward.

Mr. Jones discussed the results of the assessment. Findings were broken into four categories, consisting of assets, disparities, barriers, and windows of opportunities in the area. He highlighted the determined assets of the assessment findings, as these highlight the recommendations. Assets include the City's programs and investments in the area, including Douglas Park, social capital, as well as leadership and organizations. He noted that the disparities, barriers, and windows of opportunity would not be surprising to Council members, so he focused on the assets and the five recommendations provided by community conveners.

The first recommendation is to strengthen civic capital in the area. This includes the formal and informal networks in which people work collaboratively to make decisions. The second recommendation is to build on assets and income, while building financial literacy, providing opportunity for land ownership and building wealth. The third recommendation is to increase housing stability and quality with community control of land and housing. The fourth recommendation is to increase the economic vitality of the area, and uplifting businesses to create opportunities for entrepreneurship. The fifth recommendation is to improve the infrastructure and visual design of the West End.

Mr. Jones said the group of community conveners agreed upon two main strategies for which to focus. The first is rooted in Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) to create a neighborhood revitalization strategy area. This will allow through an application process to utilize CDBG funds in a more flexible manner. The second strategy is to develop a plan and infrastructure for implementation in the form of a collective impact model. Mr. Jones played a video for Council that described what a collective impact model is. He noted that it is a model that provides an opportunity to work collaboratively from a grass-roots level.

Mr. Jones discussed the aspects of how the collective impact model process works. Included is having a common agenda, mutually reinforcing activities, sharing measurement, communicating continuously, and having a backbone of support. Currently, the MLK Center and Community and Economic Development Department are the support staff for the model, but in the future, they will not be.

Mr. Jones next discussed what the collective impact model would look like for those involved in the planning process. There will be a steering committee of community leaders that will be recruited by a task force in order to begin the training and engagement soon. He said the task force consists of Alderperson Moses Robinson, Thurgood Brooks, Bonnie Ballard, and others. He said there would be working groups to develop strategies and plans to achieve established goals.

Mayor Thoms asked Mr. Jones how many people were hoped to be on the steering committee. Mr. Jones said between 7 and 11 members. He added that at the end of September, the goal is to begin meeting with the committee, and in November building work groups as well as developing a communication plan. In December, the plan is to develop the Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy Area (NRSA) application for HUD in advance of a March submission. In January through March, strategies, plans, and metrics will be agreed upon to measure progress. Throughout the rest of 2023, communicating progress and successes as well as raising funds will be the goal.

Mr. Jones noted that this would not be a quick process, but will continue over time. He entertained questions from Council. Alderperson Gilbert asked if HUD had been funding the NRSA, and if it was a typical type of funding. Community and Economic Development Director Miles Brainard approached the podium and replied that he would send Council an excerpt of a book that explains what a NRSA is. He added that once HUD receives the application and strategies, they may loosen the regulations for which CDBG funds can be deployed. Alderperson Gilbert asked if this was a new CDBG fund, or existing. Mr. Brainard confirmed it was existing funds.

Alderperson Gilbert asked with the March 2023 application submission, would it be program funding for 2024. Mr. Brainard replied yes, and it would be incorporated into the action plan for the program year mentioned. Mayor Thoms asked if anyone from the John Deere Foundation would be on the steering committee. Mr. Jones said no, mainly because no one in the Foundation lives or has familiarity with the West End of the City. They have been informed and are supportive. Alderperson Swanson expressed support of the idea. Alderperson Gilbert said she liked the financial literacy component of the plan, as it is critical to the long-term survival of the community. Alderperson Parker said he is looking forward to seeing how it progresses and how Council can help. Alderperson Gilbert asked if there would be any publishing about what is taking place. Mr. Jones said it would be as part of the communication plan.