

**StarTribune.com** | MINNEAPOLIS - ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

## What's in store for Big Stop site?

By **TERRY COLLINS**, Star Tribune

January 29, 2008

The closing of the long-troubled Big Stop Foods almost two years ago was widely seen as a victory for residents in the resurgent Jordan neighborhood in north Minneapolis.

In the past five years, the store had been a haven for teenage drug dealers, the site of a brutal murder and the scene of the overflow of a riot that started across the street. To ensure the problem convenience store never reopened, the city recently purchased the site for \$190,000, well below market value.

Now the problem is what to do with it.

There's been much chatter from city officials about demolishing the store and building two single-family homes at the corner of 26th and Knox Avenues N. But the leader of a neighborhood group questions the wisdom of building new housing in an area with one of the city's highest foreclosure rates.

Jordan has more than 200 foreclosed homes, according to recent city statistics.

"If we're going to bring in something new, let's make sure it will be of value to the neighborhood," said Jerry Moore, executive director of the Jordan Area Community Council (JACC). "We already have enough boarded-up homes."

Some residents have proposed using the spot for an office site, a small minority-owned business other than a store or to convert to green space, Moore said.

But Council Member Don Samuels, who has been involved in efforts to change the corner since he emerged as a vociferous neighborhood leader a few years ago, said there's a strong belief that housing is the best solution.

He recalls chronic loitering outside the store, police dock ing their mobile command unit in the parking lot, news conferences there to announce new crime-fighting plans and one store owner and a former JACC director wiping bloodstains off store walls after a murder.

He also recalls how other owners could do little to stop the incessant drug dealing. After the city revoked the store's license and the property went through foreclosure, police calls to the area dropped almost 100 percent.

"The citizens rose up, demanded change and the city responded," said Samuels, adding that the building could be razed by early spring. "We can't afford to keep them in limbo."

They deserve closure."

However, Benjamin Myers, JACC board chair, advanced various possibilities, including a workforce center to help residents strengthen job skills, or using the site as a dental office or headquarters for a a small family-owned construction firm..

"There's a number of different options besides housing," Myers said. "I think we need to broaden our view instead of narrowing the scope when it comes to rehabilitating the area."

Samuels counters that another commercial property wouldn't be helpful because there already are empty storefronts on nearby West Broadway, a business corridor the city is trying to revitalize.

"Everybody's looking for the best outcome," said Elfric Porte, a family housing manager with the city's Community Planning and Economic Development agency. "We believe that a commercial property is not going to be successful at that location."

Samuels said the city is willing to sit on the property and wait until the housing market turns favorable.

Moore said he understands Samuels' passion for change at the site. Discussions about new housing there were well received by JACC members two years ago, just before the foreclosure crisis, Moore said.

Since then, JACC's membership has changed, Moore added. Many involved today -- Myers for example -- have little connection to the neighborhood's troubled past.

On Friday, Moore met with city planners and developers to further share his concerns about reuse of the site. The parties will meet again at JACC's Feb. 13 neighborhood meeting.

"Nobody is disrespecting the pain that store brought; that is far from the case," Moore said. "But at the same time, all viewpoints must be considered."

Terry Collins • 612-673-1790

© 2008 Star Tribune. All rights reserved.