

## City buys "Big Stop" building on 26th Ave.

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The Big Stop convenience store at 26th and Knox avenues N. became city property the first of the year, and there's a plan in place for its future. However, one neighborhood leader is now questioning that plan, and the potential developer says they'll abide by whatever the neighborhood wants.

The background

Big Stop, 1800 26th Ave. N. has long been "in the city's cross hairs," said Fifth Ward Minneapolis City Council Member Don Samuels. Located on a street, 26th Avenue, that became infamous for drug traffic in recent years, it also was across the street from a problem house that garnered more than 300 police calls in 2003.

"I was involved in Big Stop even before I came into office," Samuels said. "We were trying to get the owner to adjust his management style. He said he was trying all the strategies. We talked about moving the bus stop, putting no parking signs on Knox, getting off-duty police to work at the store. He came to community meetings.

"People in the area were moving out to avoid the crime; there was a four-plex across the street that was a problem, other single family houses on Knox had the same profile. With the bus stop there, it was convenient for drug dealers to stand there and pretend they were waiting for a bus."

Samuels said the ownership changed and a man who was an Evangelical Christian bought it. "He seemed to have a stronger positive profile. He had big cookouts in the parking lot to attract community folks." Sometimes he preached sermons from the parking lot, Samuels added, "hoping for spiritual transformation" for the area.

"He still did not seem to be able to manage it. His son got shot. [Not fatally.] More recently, two guys chased another guy into the back office and shot his brains out. Things got bad. A group of 30 or so guys started hanging out there.

"By this time I was a council member," Samuels said. "The city came down on him to change some logistics, taking out a curb cut, putting in a sidewalk, adding a fence to reduce the drive-through factor. They did not cooperate. They got several extensions to do landscaping and other things."

The city formed a grocery store task force in 2006 to deal with problematic businesses such as Big Stop and the former Wafanas, at Lyndale and 26th avenues N. It put 16 stores on the list, many in North Minneapolis, and stopped granting long extensions to owners to fix problems. So far, the city has closed six.

"We don't want to shut them all down," Samuels said. "We want to shut down enough so that people know we're serious. At some point the message will get out that they have to change their behavior. That hasn't quite happened yet."

According to city records, on March 14, 2006, Licenses and Consumer Services Director Ricardo Cervantes sent Samuel and Alberta Grey, owners of Dens-Light, Inc. (the company that owned Big Stop), a notice to appear before the Public Safety and Regulatory Services Committee of the Minneapolis City Council regarding possible revocation of its business license due to failure to comply with site plan review standards and "lurking and loitering near business."

Although the Greys' address appears in current white page listings as Shakopee, their phone has been disconnected. The property owner when the city bought it was Park Midway Bank in St. Paul; the building's taxable value in 2007 was \$260,000.

Samuels said that after the city revoked the owners' license, the Greys sold the store to a man formerly

employed at another of the North Side's problem stores. "He was all ready to open until I grilled him about his capacity to handle hoards of delinquent males. We convinced him that we would hold him to such a high standard that he couldn't pass muster. The deal fell apart. The building went into foreclosure. Some kids drove through the front door after it was closed, and stole some cigarettes. Now it's boarded up."

Samuels added, "It's unconscionable to me that people who would not live in the city are able to venture in for the purpose of doing business, and create the kind of blight that makes them not want to live in the city. These people are not willing to work hard enough to have a nice business. We've had store owners say, 'What do you think? It's North Minneapolis.' I don't know of a single problem store owner who lives in North Minneapolis."

"This has been good for the community, to rise up and create a different sense of understanding, that the neighbors will not tolerate this. We will close you down if you don't run a good business," Samuels said.

He said he and other city staff worked an eight hour shift at Wafanas last year. "We were three African Americans, so we were in good disguise. At the end of the day we took a poll; 95 percent of our customers were African American men between the ages of 15 and 28, buying chips and pop. These stores weren't getting neighborhood residents running down to the store to buy a gallon of milk. These were rest stops for drug dealers."

#### The cluster plan

David Rubedor, president of PRG (formerly known as Powderhorn Residents Group) said they have been working with Neighborhood Housing Services (based in North Minneapolis) and Urban Homeworks on a "cluster strategy" of concentrated redevelopment.

"The [Jordan Area Community Council] neighborhood is heavily involved in this. As of right now, there are five active clusters being worked on. This is called the James Avenue Cluster, one of the first. It includes the area between 25th and 26th to the north and south and Irving, Knox, and Logan to the east and west. We want to redevelop substandard properties, vacant lots, vacant houses, and put up some new fencing, decorative metal instead of the broken or damaged chain link that is already there, to get a uniform look to the cluster project.

"We've already picked up some foreclosed properties, but we decided it really didn't make any sense to do any redevelopment in the area as long as Big Stop was still open, or looked like it would reopen. That would be a waste of money."

Now that the city owns Big Stop, he said they've been talking about razing Big Stop and building two single family homes.

PRG is 31 years old, Rubedor added; up until three years ago when they started working in North Minneapolis, the group's work was primarily in South Minneapolis.

"I live in the Jordan neighborhood, and a lot of people feel that North Minneapolis gets the short end of the stick," he said.

#### The reuse idea

JACC executive director Jerry Moore said, "There is no doubt that closing Big Stop is considered by many to be a victory. It was a problem in the neighborhood. But there still is the question, 'Now what? What do we do with the structure?' The city is proposing demolition and two houses being built as part of a cluster project.

"But some folks are asking about reuse," Moore added. "Before we bulldoze it, could it be reused to benefit the community? It could be something beyond a convenience store. We could put a small minority owned business there. This might be an opportunity.

"I appreciate the work the partnership and cluster project have done, but when you look at our housing stock

and the number of foreclosures, is it financially feasible to take this out? We have few enough businesses in Jordan as it is; turning this into housing might be a gross misuse of city dollars."

Rubedor said, "The idea behind the cluster is that the neighborhood drives the plan. If the neighborhood is looking at reuse instead of housing, that's totally in the realm of the cluster initiative. We need to be flexible. There's a huge challenge in the market for housing, right now, although single family homes are one of the stronger uses."

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