River Street In Transition

By David Proctor

uring Boise's infancy it was an orchard, with groves of fruit trees that stretched to the river. By 1910, what is now called the River Street neighborhood had developed into one of the city's first residential areas.

Then came the railroad and the accompanying warehouses that cut it off from downtown. By the 1940s it was virtually the only place in Boise where black families were allowed to buy homes.

Later, light industry moved in. River Street became a through street and cut the neighborhood in half. Speculators and high-density resident zoning followed.

Today, change is again afoot for the River Street neighborhood. After decades of isolation and neglect, city planners have ambitious plans for the area that has so far been relatively untouched by the rapid development of Boise's downtown just blocks to the north.

"We want to recreate what was going on in the 1920s," says Rick Greenfield, executive director of Capital City Development Corp., the city's redevelopment arm. "We

A neglected section of Boise is about to change.

CHARLE MINOR AND RELIGION.

Bordered by Boise's busy downtown, the old, once proud River Street neighborhood is about to change.

want to mix residential, small commercial and office uses, and we want a great deal of pedestrian accessibility from those uses to downtown."

Two years ago, with the original city-center eight-block redevelopment just about finished, the CCDC turned to the River Street-Myrtle Street area. For the next 20 years or so, this irregularly shaped chunk of nearly 300 acres between

Broadway and Americana boulevards will have the CCDC's full attention.

The CCDC's new redevelopment plan describes the current River Street neighborhood as an area of mixed uses, with warehouses and large tracts of open land that "lacks a cohesive, neighborhood image due to a mix of older substandard dwelling units."

Longtime residents like Erma Hayman and Cozia Hardeman remember a time in the past when the neighborhood more resembled the future Greenfield envisions.

Hardeman grew up there in the 1960s and '70s, moved to the Bench and has come back. She remembers it as a village that raised children.

"If I did something wrong on 15th Street, by the time I got home I was in trouble before I could tell my mother," she says. "Everybody was one big family then. It's not that way now."

Says Hayman, who has lived on Ash Street for 50 of her 89 years and raised three children and a grandson there: "It was a clean little neighborhood... everybody owned their own homes,"

It was a good place to live. There were neighborhood grocery stores, and she could walk to work at Lerner's. Her grandson, Dick Madry, was the first black to graduate from Boise State after it became a four-year school

"We looked out for each other. If somebody got sick or died, we always took something over to the family. It isn't that way anymore."

River Street was one of the few Hoise neighborhoods where black families, many of whom came to Gowen Field during World War II, were welcome. That's when Hayman moved in from her parents' farm in Nampa.

"We couldn't live any other place," she explains. "It was very prejudiced. If you wanted to buy a place out of this neighborhood, when they found out you were black you didn't get anything,"

Hardeman says the neighborhood began to change about 20 years ago.

"Black people were moving up, getting better jobs. It was just like the Jeffersons," she smiles.

Hardeman did it too. She got married and moved to an apartment on the Bench. But in 1986 she bought her mother's house and moved home.

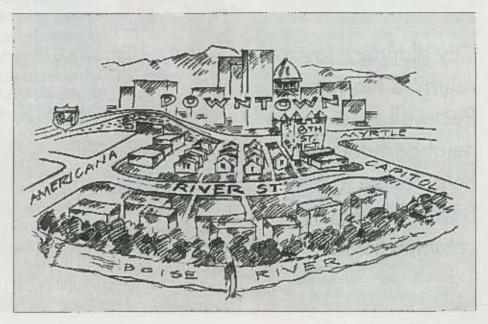
"It was seen as a step back," she says, though she obviously disagrees. "I thought about moving out, but everything is so expensive. So I think I'll just stay."

The CCDC redevelopment plan isn't the first one for the neighborhood.

John Bertram moved into the area in 1969 as a VISTA volunteer with El-Ada Community Action Program. His job was to draw up neighborhood plans that would help River Street get back on its feet.

Finished in 1973, the plan called for such things as rehabilitation of existing homes, 1,100 new housing units of various types and prices, improvement and expansion of Pioneer Walkway and the improvement of city utilities. Twenty years later the CCDC plan is like deja vu all over again.

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RIVER STREET

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There were a lot of reasons the plan didn't work then, Bertram says, including the city's nearly fatal fixation on building a downtown mall, an economic downturn in the early 1980s and indecision on where the Connector would go.

His biggest disappointment was that the land along the river was sold for offices instead of high-density housing.

There were successes, though, Bertram's plan helped save the Eighth Street bridge and clean up Eighth Street.

"It was a lot of things that didn't gel," explains Bertram, who bought a house on 14th Street and lived there from 1975-1987 and still has an office in the neighborhood, "But I believe if someone had had the foresight to do a first-class residential development, it would be very successful now.

"I always found it a wonderful place to live because it was so close to all these facilities. We're just blocks away from the Greenbelt, there are two parks nearby, and the library. BSU and the museums are all close."

Once the CCDC plan is carried out, the River Street neighborhood will be transformed into a mix of new single-family homes and high-density residential structures (row houses, condominiums and apartments) in all price ranges, small stores and offices. A new and improved Pioneer Walkway will offer an easy and scenic walk from the Greenbelt and the river to the center of the city. The streets will be well lit and landscanced.

The area will attract a broad mix of people - high income couples and Boise State faculty who can walk to work, long-time residents who want to stay in the neighborhood, empty-nesters who can be close to downtown and the museums, and lower-income single parents or young couples just starting out.

What will happen to the low-income families when River Street becomes gentrified?

"We intend to provide affordable hous-

ing," says Dennis Clark, development coordinator for CCDC. "We want the broadest range we can get because that range has a higher chance of survival than if it's all one segment."

In Hardeman's view the plans for River Street have far more plusses than minuses.

"I'm happy to see changes," she says, "There's a special part of me that loves this neighborhood. I want to see it go up." \(\sigma\)

David Proctor has written for Rolling Stone, USA Today, The Salt Lake Tribune, The Idaho Statesman and Edging West, as well as FOCUS. His first hook is scheduled for publication in the fall of 1997.

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