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Maplewood - What Went Right?

We all want our communities revitalized, but obstacles and inertia usually get in the way. Maplewood made it happen.

BY KEVIN M. MITCHELL



PHOTO BY PHOTOGRAPH BY DILIP VISHWANAT

I like to call Maplewood the 15-year overnight sensation," jokes Rob Birenbaum. "A diverse group of people worked from the early 1980s on--and, seemingly all at once, everything came together."

The players in this Horatio Alger tale include a group of progressive small-business owners (including Birenbaum, who owned Drum Headquarters on Manchester from 1984 until last winter and still owns several Maplewood properties), a series of five exceptional Chamber of

Commerce executive directors (including the current one, Deb Faber), an ambitious mayor (Mark Langston), an international company that realizes the stake it has in the community (Sunnen) and a savvy longtime city manager (Marty Corcoran).

Plus just plain kismet and good luck.

The trophies of the "overnight" success are impressive: Maplewood boasts two of the metro area's finest restaurants, Monarch and Arthur Clay's. There's the ever-hip Schlafly Bottleworks. Boutiques and specialty shops range from Femme and Annata to Penzeys Spices. Maplewood has landed lucrative (if controversial) mass retailers, chief among them Wal-Mart. A \$6 million townhome development called Cambridge Commons is rising in the center of the city. And homeowners have seen their property appreciate 17 percent each year since 2000.

Not bad for a city that had trouble paying its bills for decades, was burdened with declining schools and scandals and had a main drag that was a shadow of its former self.

early visionaries In 1982, Ellen Bern was hired as the first full-time executive director of the Maplewood Chamber of Commerce. She came to a city where the mayor and three aldermen had just been recalled and "people were so ashamed of the city that they didn't put 'Maplewood' on their return envelopes," she says. "People told me I was crazy to take the job."

Bern worked closely with the leadership of Sunnen, who offered support and resources, and hit the streets, persuading business owners to back important ordinances. "People have to be made to believe," she says, "but it doesn't happen overnight." She left the position in 1990, but those who followed built on her foundation.

In 1997, Maplewood got lucky: Bob and Barb Suberi bought the eyesore at the corner of Manchester and Sutton. "The building had been derelict for five years," Bob Suberi says. "It was a mess, but it had 10,000 square feet of freestanding area and I thought it could be a great restaurant." He resurrected Bobby's Creole, a popular restaurant he had owned in University City years earlier.

Friends from his Loop days told Suberi he was crazy. "They were partially correct," he laughs. But he knew what he was doing: Great restaurants are destinations, and the good press generated by Bobby's helped Maplewood considerably. (When the Suberis moved to Florida in 2003, they leased the building to the high-profile Monarch restaurant, and even more good press ensued.)

But Bob Suberi was much more than a restaurateur.

Like Birenbaum, he also saw potential for downtown Maplewood. The two lobbied successfully for key ordinances to encourage retail and foot traffic.

"Some community members were strongly against one ordinance in particular," recalls Suberi, "but the Chamber of Commerce executive director at the time, Carol Kline, really believed in it--probably to her political detriment." The hot potato was CB1, which stipulated that all future businesses on the first floor of the 7200 and 7300 blocks of Manchester be retail only (no storefront offices for lawyers, doctors, real-estate agents or other professionals). At first, the ordinance failed. But Birenbaum and Suberi personally lobbied every City Council member until it passed in 1998.

There were honest disagreements on other issues as well. Bob Scheidt owns Scheidt Hardware, a century-old hardware store in a beautiful building. As a resident of Maplewood for more than 50 years--and someone who sat on the City Council for eight--Scheidt has a vested interest in the direction the city takes. "I'd like to see the city government retain the quaintness of the smaller shops on Manchester," he says. "What they put up on Hanley looks like 'Everytown, USA.'

"My biggest concern is that the city officials don't seem to care about private-property rights," he continues. "The mayor and City Council got extremely lucky with Wal-Mart and Sam's Club but didn't care about the [displaced] residents' feelings." Scheidt says city officials don't care whether a new enterprise serves Maplewood residents. "They bent over backward for Monarch, but a majority of Maplewood residents don't eat there. I can afford it, but I won't pay that much for a sandwich."

Birenbaum knows Scheidt's concerns all too well: "He's opinionated, and we often disagree. But, boy, when he comes to these meetings to talk, you can bet he's really done his research."

a deal with the devil In 1999, the poorly designed Kmart building with its scary parking garage was demolished. This allowed Shop 'n Save to move from its building a couple of blocks away, leaving an opening for the future home of the Schlafly Bottleworks.

Longtime DJ Mark Langston (at WIL-FM and then KSD-FM) moved to Maplewood in 1997 and won the \$4,800-a-year part-time job of mayor in 2000. Maplewood was in tough financial shape when he took over.

The city had been forced to cut staff and freeze salaries and was in dire need of a new fire truck.

"I couldn't just sit on the sidelines, corny as that sounds," says Langston, whose early triumph was bringing the Schlafly Bottleworks to Maplewood. "Originally it was going to be a Department of Revenue office." He lobbied in Jefferson City and, at the same time, working closely with city manager Marty Corcoran, romanced Tom Schlafly to consider the space.

Schlafly was looking at a place on the Hill but was won over. "We were able to work with him faster, and friendlier," Langston says. "We were able to give him a lot of personal service, help him through the process of getting permits and so forth."

Although landing Schlafly significantly increased Maplewood's hip quotient, the coup didn't solve Maplewood's financial problems. The city makes around \$25,000 a year in taxes from the Bottleworks, but you can't buy \$1 million fire trucks with that kind of money.

For a fire truck, you need something big--really big.

Enter the most controversial part of the Maplewood turnaround: the commercial development on Hanley that would become Wal-Mart, Sam's Club and Lowe's.

"Wal-Mart--that's a tough one," Suberi sighs. "I'm not a fan of Wal-Mart, not a fan of Sam's and not a fan of eminent domain. But the city was having fiscal problems and they had to do something."

Langston clears his throat: "Let me start by saying the Hanley development was very touching to me. We lost 200 homes--not houses, but homes, places people lived for 50 years or better." He insists that, ultimately, the community came together: "The homes were worth around \$80,000 to \$120,000, and residents got about \$225,000--plus, 66 stlmag.com September 2005

in some cases, we helped with relocation and moving expenses."

Critics say such deals end up costing communities--especially in what they have to give up to developments in the form of tax-increment financing packages, better known as TIFs. Cities receive some of the retailers' sales tax, but often the retailers get such a big tax break that they end up a losing proposition. "The developer representing Wal-Mart wanted a \$30 million TIF for the deal," recalls Langston.

That's where some good fortune came into play: Costco was also eyeing the area, and Wal-Mart wanted so badly to keep Costco out that it went for the deal without the TIF. Today Maplewood is reaping more than \$2 million a year from the development.

"We've had some very spirited debates, and it was a tough decision," says Langston. "Many were against the development, but I would say to them, 'What's your idea? Give us ideas to accomplish what we need without raising taxes.'

"They never came up with anything, and that made me very suspicious."

not over yet Missteps are made. Langston and the City Council made plans to use eminent domain to wipe out seven homes and 18 viable businesses, many in historic buildings the owners had rehabbed themselves. One of the owners, Jennifer Williams of St. Louis Closet Co., joined the 400 who descended on City Hall to protest the plan. Langston and the council quickly backpedaled, not only nixing their plan but swiftly passing an ordinance against the use of eminent domain for private developers. So even when things go wrong in Maplewood, they go right--at least according to Williams.

"The mayor really did listen," she says. "I think Maplewood will become one of the most sought-after towns in the country, because anyone who has ever lost a home or business because of eminent domain will flock here.

"Maplewood's strength is its history, its eclectic businesses, its quirky mix of businesses," she adds. "We don't want to just tear it all down and build condos and strip malls."

The latest investments in Maplewood have come from Rothschild Development and Bellington Realty, which started buying commercial property avidly. "Maplewood was not even on these two developers' radar five years ago," says Birenbaum. "The fact that they now have an interest in Maplewood is validation that we did our job."

It also helped that Marty Simpson--once billed by the St. Louis Business Journal as the "Pied Piper of Maplewood" and by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch as "the future of Maplewood's downtown"--sold the property he'd bought up just a few years earlier, and never managed to develop. Pete Rothschild, president of Rothschild Development and the beneficiary of Simpson's failure, says "right now Maplewood is the hottest spot for development in the metro area, and I think it will appreciate more in the near- and midterm than any other inner suburb of St. Louis."

Rothschild now owns the old City Hall, the old furniture store at Manchester and Sutton and the former Newberry Department Store, among other properties. His newest tenant, Mike Johnson, owns BARcelona in Clayton and is opening Boogaloo, a Caribbean-themed restaurant on Manchester. The old City Hall will likely become an Italian restaurant, and other restaurateurs are talking with Rothschild.

"We've turned down a number of folks," he says. "Chain restaurants, fast food-type restaurants ... a beauty school was interested in one of the spaces and would have paid anything to get it, but we turned them down."

When it's pointed out that's that what developers are supposed to do--lease and sell to the highest bidder--Rothschild snorts. "If I was in it just for the money, I'd be doing warehouses in Fenton."

Langston says that a deal is on the table to create more than 100 condos in the downtown area and even more retail space down Sutton. Also, he'd like to see a couple of less-desirable tenants on Manchester go away: "If the pawnshops and Rent-A-Center moved tomorrow, I'd be very happy," he admits. "I shouldn't say that out loud, but it's true."

Deb Faber, executive director of the Chamber of Commerce since 2002, is putting her background in public relations to work bringing high-profile events to the city. "Our annual Christmas-tree walk is quickly becoming

a St. Louis favorite, and we've been doing a showcase of homes that is very popular," she says. Next she wants to see the blighted Deer Creek strip mall revitalized.

Faber credits Dr. Linda Henke, super-intendent of the Maplewood Richmond Heights schools, for turning Maplewood's schools around. And Birenbaum insists that it's the right mix of progressive people that has made Maplewood such a success. "It's always been a cooperative effort," he says. "It wasn't a private club; it wasn't just small business. It was corporate types, residents, Chamber presidents and a good city manager, all rolling up their sleeves."