

**East Gateway
Metropolitan Redevelopment Area
Focus Group: Central Ave. Segment 1
Meeting Minutes**

Tuesday, April 6th, 2010

6:30 p.m. – 8:30: p.m.

Hawthorne Elementary School

Attending Staff:

Gabriel Rivera, Project Manager, COA Metropolitan Redevelopment Agency

Richard Asenap, Program Specialist, Metropolitan Redevelopment Agency

Susan Vigil, Intern, Metropolitan Redevelopment Agency

Barbara Herrington, Project Manager, Sites Southwest

James Aranda, Planner, Sites Southwest

Attending Government Officials:

Albuquerque City Councilor Don Harris

State Representative James P. White

State Senator Tim Keller

1) Introduction and Orientation:

Gabriel Rivera began the meeting by introducing attending staff as well as attending government representatives. He explained that the April 6th meeting would be the first of 3 focus group meetings held to determine community preferences and ideas to offer the best opportunities for revitalizing the East Gateway MRA area. This meeting was the 1st of a series of focus groups discussing the East Gateway MRA corridor between Wyoming Blvd. to Eubank Blvd.

Barbara Herrington explained the difference between the recently drafted East Gateway Sector Plan and the East Gateway Metropolitan Redevelopment Plan. An MRA plan targets projects on specific sites for commercial and neighborhood revitalization, while a sector plan addresses zoning and related land use and transportation issues for a specific area. The first step in the MR process is to designate a boundary and this requires community support and City Council approval. The second, step is to work further with the community to develop a plan to assist a redevelopment area with revitalization efforts with such tools as: Tax Increment Financing, MR Bonds, Financial Incentives, Public/Private Partnerships, Land Acquisition, Enhance Public Services and Infrastructure, Waivers on Impact Fees, and have the ability to leverage Local, State and Federal Funds, and, finally, to remove barriers to private investment in a Metropolitan Redevelopment Area.

2) **Neighborhood Association Leaders – Comments and Perspectives**

The South Los Altos Neighborhood Association Vice President offered these insights:

DRAFT East Gateway Sector Plan:

The South Los Altos Neighborhood Association Vice President who was involved with the East Gateway Sector Plan planning process commented that the sector plan and MRA plan should work hand-in-hand. The DRAFT East Gateway Sector Plan changes much of the zoning along Central Ave. He stated that the East Gateway Sector Plan discussed the possible installation of a Transportation Center with a Park-and-Ride, on East Central. According to this meeting attendee, the Park-and-Ride currently located at the Smith's parking lot, at Tramway and Central, is a low priority for MRCOG, which prefers a location closer to I-40. The necessary infrastructure for a park-and-ride is not in place. The DRAFT East Gateway Sector Plan area is second in line for a new public library, approximately with in the next ten years.

Commercial:

The South Los Altos Neighborhood Association Vice President stated that the South Los Altos Neighborhood Association cultivates a “business friendly” environment. When they were notified of Walgreen's intent to sell liquor, they negotiated a deal with the pharmacy to prohibit the sale of mini-liquor bottles and fortified wines, thus helping to eliminate parking lot drunkenness and safety issues. The South Los Altos Neighborhood Association invited and encouraged restaurants such as the Golden Coral, Chilies, Church's, I-Hop, and Dion's to locate on East Central. They wish to keep the neighborhood residential but encourage and enjoy their commercial and retail districts.

Residential:

A long-time resident of the South Los Altos neighborhood attended grade school at Hawthorne Elementary where this first Focus Group meeting was held. Most of the housing in the neighborhood was constructed around 1958. The South Los Altos neighborhood, located east of Wyoming Blvd., is 80% owner-occupied, while the west side of Wyoming Blvd. is dominated by rental units. The South Los Altos neighborhood is located close to a major transit corridor as well as boarding a well-kept golf course, both of which add to the area's value. He noted that the South Los Altos neighborhood is experiencing a renaissance in community attractiveness and cohesion.

This neighborhood representative advised that the redevelopment plan inspect properties in the area that are “dragging the neighborhood down”. This neighborhood representative expressed that no business or neighborhood is isolated but that both negative and positive influences flow back and forth between different areas.

Safety:

The South Los Altos Neighborhood Association representative stated that the area has a good relationship with the S.E. Area Police Command “second to none”. The neighborhood association representative advised, that “if one area is cleaned up, there will be less spill-over of crime into other parts of neighborhood. The neighborhood conducts regular clean-ups to clear junk out of people’s yards.

Lighting:

This neighborhood representative advised that better lighting will help lessen criminal activity on Central Ave. One area especially is in need of attention: 1) the area around and to the east of the Caravan Tavern found at 7605 Central Ave. It is very dark, especially on the north side of Central Ave.

3) Central Ave. Corridor Business Owners – Comments and Perspectives

Several business owners, whose establishments are located on Central Ave. within the East Gateway MRA, attended the focus group meeting and offered the following insights:

Historical, La Puerta Lodge:

The owner of La Puerta Lodge Described La Puerta as a ‘family business.’ The Lodge is located at 9710 Central Ave. La Puerta Lodge is a registered ‘cultural property’ in New Mexico and is on the National Register of Historic Places. La Puerta Lodge also exhibits a rare and historical neon sign. The sign is situated low to the ground, thus, it is often vandalized, and requires replacement letters. Despite theses vandalism issues, the owner of La Puerta Lodge is proud of the sign’s historical significance and keeps it lit.

The owner of La Puerta Lodge does not prefer to lease to people off the street, but rather primarily to lease to people interested in the historical status of the La Puerta Lodge. Older generations of ranchers and New Mexico’s small town residents recommend the hotel to their children and grandchildren, who travel from all over the state to see and stay at the historic La Puerta Lodge.

Liquor and Licenses:

Two Businessmen invested in the East Gateway area for over 60 years, and now the current owner’s of Perea’s Restaurant, and Blue Jeans Bar (9901 Central Ave, and 9018 Central Ave., respectively), expressed opinions on the sale of liquor in the MRA area. These two business owner’s believe that more liquor licenses should be allocated to the area. There used to be 38 bars along East Central Ave.—now there are very few. They suggested that new provisions for liquor sales, such as allowing the sale of liquor within 1,500 yards of public areas, would revitalize the area.

Other advice and concerns of East Gateway business owners include securing infrastructure, such as improving street surveillance systems, and encouraging businesses with expedited fire, health, and safety inspections. According to one business owner, a once thriving business on Central Ave. is gone now because it did not pass City fire department safety standards.

4.) Opportunities and Sites Identified:

- a) **The Luna Lodge at 9119 Central (Central and Zuni)** is opening a housing development for low income and disabled people. It will be gated and controlled. The property adjacent to the Luna Lodge is vacant. Can the City help develop the vacant adjacent parcel in concert with the Luna Lodge development?
- b) **Vacant Grocery Store at Juan Tabo and Central, north-east corner:** Why is the Juan Tabo/Central grocery store boarded up? There is vagrancy occurring at this location. The most western part of the East Gateway MRA, where this building is located, needs a grocery store. Mr. Rivera is investigating the issue and in contact with the owner's of the site. Mr. Rivera stated that a Dollar Store was allowed to lease the building at a very low rate. The lease gives the Dollar Store the right to accept or reject other parties interested in the strip mall.

Councilor Harris commented that, before he was City Councilor, he was involved as a lawyer, with the legal clarifications and status of the vacant grocery store. At that time, the building is held in trust by a distant landlord. Currently the building is owned by Maestas & Ward. Brooks Grocery Store may be interested in the site.

- c.) **West of Garcia on Central Ave.:** There is a public site currently used as a road maintenance facility for storing supplies needed to salt icy roads. The meeting attendees suggested vacant lots south of Central would be better suited for the road maintenance facility. They expressed that the road maintenance facility could be moved south of Central Ave. where other light industrial uses are located. Mr. Rivera stated that, as a public entity, the MRA and City potentially could repurpose the property and work to redevelop it with something more aesthetically appropriate.
- d.) **Empty Mobil Home Park, east of Eubank Blvd. on Central Ave.:** This site is recommended in the East Gateway Sector Plan for a green area or park.
- e.) **Mixed Use, Live/Work Developments:** The area could provide housing for UNM students, and temporary workers or interns at Kirtland Air Force Base and Sandia Base neighborhoods.
- f.) **Higher End Restaurants and Businesses:** Central Ave. needs more businesses that cater to higher incomes.

5.) Identified Area Issues:

- a. Chevron Station at (Parcival/Central Ave.): There is a problem with alcohol sales at this location. "We need to make the East Gateway less attractive for prostitutes and vagrants to hang out."
- b. Moon and Eubank, corner: Labeled an "eye sore."

- c. Junk Yard properties: Holding lots for scrap parts and equipment, there are junk cars in front, and garbage fenced in back. Guard dogs scare people from walking on the side walk.
- d. Northeast corner of Juan Tabo and Central, old grocery store needs redevelopment.
- e. Safety needs to be a number 1 priority.
- f. Clean up the corridor: Mr. Rivera commented that the “history and knowledge” of the area constituents will lend a sense of identity and respect to the corridor.

6.) **Character and History, and Recommendations for Central Ave.**

- a. Neon and Lighting: In 1960, Central Ave. was “the hub of Albuquerque with all of the neon...when you flew into Albuquerque, Central Ave. was bright.”
- b. **Busy Corridor:** Central Ave. has more traffic than other streets in the City.
- c. **Lanes and medians:** The Central Ave. suicide lane is very dangerous. Spot medians would be helpful. Central Ave. and Eubank Blvd. need to be rebuilt to allow for medians to work.
- d. **Reroute I-40 travelers onto Central Ave.:** This can be accomplished with beautification, and gateways, and signage. Invite people to see the town. “People will say, ‘Here is Albuquerque, forget the freeway.’” State Representative James P. White commented that we need “to create a different image right at the entrance into Albuquerque.”
 - i. The changes planned for Eubank and Central Ave. are a good start for this initiative.
 - ii. The East Gateway Central Ave. freeway exit at Eubank offers museums such as the National Atomic Museum.
 - iii. The Middle Rio Grande Council of Governments may obtain resources to build archways for Gateways onto East Central with a Route 66 theme, suggested material: Neon.
 - iv. Travelers could jump back on the I-40 at Wyoming Blvd. or keep traveling down Central Ave. all the way through town.

7.) **Metropolitan Redevelopment as a Tool for Economic Development**

Councilor Harris explained how the methods employed by the Metropolitan Redevelopment Agency stimulate economic development in an area. He began by explaining how the boundaries of the East Gateway MRA were 1st determined. Councilor Harris’s district extends to Eubank Blvd. along Central Ave.; however, he observed blighted conditions along the Central Ave. corridor continuing south of Eubank Blvd. to Wyoming Blvd, and thus advised extending the boundaries south of District 9.

Councilor Harris stated that three elements are necessary in an area for redevelopment to take place: land use controls, a market place, and market incentives. While the DRAFT East Gateway Sector Plan worked to create

favorable zoning and land use controls along the East Central commercial corridor, the Metropolitan Redevelopment Plan will work to solidify the commercial culture and activate market incentives such as Tax Increment Financing and impact fee waivers. The final piece of the puzzle will be “waiting for the free market” to respond. It is inadvisable to disturb the existing commercial market, but the City will look to recruit new businesses to the area. The East Gateway area encompasses several upper end neighborhoods which will help stimulate the market, for instance, the Four Hills Neighborhood. The neighborhood residents and business people “need to stay optimistic and involved” for the process to be successful. He cautioned that redevelopment takes a long time and participants should stay optimistic and involved.

The Segment 1 focus group meeting for the East Gateway MRA Central Ave. Corridor area from Wyoming Blvd. east to Eubank Blvd. was adjourned at 8:00 p.m.