

## TOWN TAVERN

600 Jackson Ave.

The sign says avenue but everyone here calls it street. That's the right word for a thing like this — a cracked slab of asphalt baked gray by the sun.

Jackson Street. Three hard syllables for six short blocks.

These days it's just another ugly rung on the urban grid, but a half a century ago Jackson Street used to be something. Back then nobody bothered with street or avenue, they just called it the Chocolate Strip. And every weekend African-Americans filled its sidewalks and bars.

That was a long time ago, before integration, and things have changed. The Brown Derby, the Chickadee and the Cotton Club all closed ages ago. Carver House and El Morocco — long gone — just like Mrs. Hughes' liquor store.

Only the Town Tavern remains. The Chocolate Strip's original showroom and casino, dating to 1955, still opens its poker tables at 5 p.m. every day. Before that you can play the slots or video poker, or have a bite at the restaurant, which specializes in chicken and smells like the tang of old fryer grease.

You won't see much music or comedy in the Town Tavern anymore. The decay that has taken so much from Jackson Street claimed the old showroom in 2003, when the ceiling collapsed under the weight of heavy equipment stored up there by the previous owner, Elijah Green. Now the doors are padlocked, but the new owner, Green's daughter Tara Jackson, wants to bring it back. She still gets calls from performers who want to play the stage once taken by B.B. King, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Denise LaSalle and Redd Foxx. The other calls come from people interested in her property. Not in helping her fix it up, but hoping she might be in the mood to sell.

Like a lot of small business owners, Jackson has hit some hard times. The bar, which has been in her family for more than 30 years, isn't as full as it used to be, and a long table in the restaurant reserved for old timers usually sits empty.

"Lord I don't know what to do but I'm not giving it up without a fight," she says.

She could use some help. A business improvement loan for repairs to the showroom might be enough to get her back on her feet, but who's making those these days?

Then there's the city's redevelopment agency, which offers incentives, mostly in the form of rebates, for business owners who want to make upgrades within the redevelopment area.

The area includes Jackson's block, which was added in 1988. But unfortunately she's on a street, a historically significant one, that hasn't seen a dime of public investment. She's the first to admit that the process of applying for redevelopment assistance can be daunting, particularly when no one is reaching out to help you.

"The Westside has been a tough area," says Scott Adams, operations manager for the Las Vegas Redevelopment Agency. "You can see a doughnut hole that we did not include because it's mostly single-family homes, and there was a fear among the residents that we would use eminent domain to take their property. It's a catch-22, they weren't included because of eminent domain and now the very tools they need can't be spent in that area."

The fear isn't entirely unreasonable. In the 1990s, the city used eminent domain downtown, sparking a legal battle that waged for years.

Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard has seen some improvement courtesy of Adams' agency, which has contributed property to Expertise Cosmetology Institute, Edmond Town Center and, Cox Communications. Still, public investment in the area pales in comparison to surrounding neighborhoods. The city has spent more than \$10 million on redevelopment in the Westside, a figure that includes land donations such as the one that kept a Bank of America that would have been displaced by road construction in the neighborhood. Much of the redevelopment in West Las Vegas has focused on non-profits and businesses that relocated from nearby areas.

By contrast, the redevelopment agency could commit as much as \$247 million to lure new businesses to Union Park. The city has already agreed to spend \$40 million on infrastructure and has signed notes that will refund \$49.2 million in property taxes to area businesses during the next two decades.

The city's lopsided emphasis on developing areas east of the freeway infuriates West Las Vegans, who began mobilizing after the Nevada Department of Transportation abruptly closed F Street in September. That road directly linked the economically depressed neighborhood to finished Union Park developments like the Molasky Corporate Center and the Premium Outlet Mall.

To date, the redevelopment agency has reimbursed downtown businesses to the tune of \$2.5 million. The rest of the agency's budget has been spent on other things, like streetscape improvements, historic preservation and direct incentives. As a result, downtown is booming. The Westside, however, continues to struggle.

"That wall cuts us off from City Hall and it cuts us off from the county building," says Linda Bell, a longtime resident of the neighborhood. "It says 'You don't deserve to be a part of this community.'"

## UNION PARK

The city acquired 61 acres southwest of downtown when it swapped suburban land with the previous owner. Since then, it's been busy transforming the former rail yard into a live-work development unlike anything else in Las Vegas, featuring the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health, the Smith Center for the Performing Arts, office buildings, hotels, condos and shopping.

Before the city intervened, the old Union Pacific property was vacant and contaminated by spilled fuel, buried railroad ties and old equipment. "The Union Park rail line here in Las Vegas was an environmentally contaminated piece that nobody wanted, quite frankly," Adams says.

The city is wagering that its investments, which could top \$247 million, will yield \$6 billion in private investment and thousands of permanent jobs.

## WESTSIDE SCHOOL

330 W. Washington Ave.

The oldest remaining schoolhouse in Las Vegas was built in 1923 and houses an NPR station and the Economic Opportunity Board of Clark County. Educators expanded the building in 1940 to serve the Westside's growing African-American population, many of whom moved to Nevada for military service. Federal and county dollars, as well as

listener contributions, support its occupants, but the redevelopment agency has not contributed to its preservation.

#### WORLD MARKET CENTER

495 S. Grand Central Parkway

A series of furniture showrooms built to compete with High Point, N.C.'s International Home Furnishings Center is going up in eight phases, with five separate tax incentives.

The three that have been signed return a total of \$2.6 million annually to the project.

That's money that doesn't go in to public coffers. So far, there are no projects in West Las Vegas with agreements like World Market Center's, which refund a portion of paid property taxes for improvements to the business.

#### NEONOPOLIS

450 Fremont St.

The city's \$32 million investment in this downtown mall (the parking garage underneath the property is municipally owned) hasn't produced much more than a revolving door of tenants and empty reassurance from City Hall. In addition to Union Park, the city has also emphasized redevelopment in the downtown core and plowed millions into projects such as Main Street Station and the Fremont Street Entertainment District. The City Council is moving forward with \$267 million in construction bonds that would be used to build a new City Hall so that the old property can be developed into a new casino.

#### FREMONT STREET EXPERIENCE

400 Fremont St.

A blighted area, according to Adams, is one with declining property values, such as downtown Las Vegas in the mid-1980s. The presence of major hotel-casinos, including the Golden Nugget, wasn't enough to keep the area from sliding into urban decay. To bring it back, the casinos collaborated with each other and the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority on the Fremont Street Experience, and the city contributed the Big Red Garage, worth \$23 million. (The land under that garage was taken in a controversial eminent domain action that property owners fought for years, before the city finally settled in 2004.)

#### FIFTH STREET SCHOOL

401 S. Fourth St.

Built in 1936, the city-owned grammar school reopened late last year after a \$13.4 million restoration effort funded entirely by the redevelopment agency. The building is home to a number of cultural organizations and is available for public events and rental.

#### GLITTER GULCH/ OLYMPIC GARDEN

One of the ways the redevelopment agency aids business owners is with visual improvement grants that offset some of the cost of upgrades. These two downtown strip clubs each received \$50,000 visual improvement grants, despite controversy about tax dollars flowing to adult businesses. Three Westside businesses have been approved for \$133,750 of the \$2 million given out, less than 7 percent. The stretch of Fremont Street between Main and Eighth Streets consumed 32 percent of the visual improvement budget, with the rest distributed across downtown.

#### EDMOND TOWN CENTER

1021 W. Owens Ave.

This beleaguered shopping center in West Las Vegas has struggled to retain tenants. It replaced the Golden West Shopping Center, which burned during a riot in the late 1960s. In 2008, the city finally lured a grocery store to the center, with incentives totaling \$950,000 over seven years. In addition, the city sold 11 acres of land worth \$1-2 million to the developer for a dollar.

#### MOULIN ROUGE

900 W. Bonanza Road

The first racially integrated hotel-casino opened in May of 1955 and closed five months later. It has been dormant since a brief resurrection in the eighties and nineties and burned almost to the ground in 2003. A succession of owners has promised to revive the landmark, but none have been successful. To date, the city has not contributed money to development efforts at the Rouge.