

THOUGHT LEADERS

FINDING SOLUTIONS

Neighborhood redevelopment advocates see potential for growth



BOTH PHOTOS: JIM COURTNEY

Above: "People see development in the (Buffalo Niagara) medical campus, but they don't see it in my neighborhood," says the Rev. Dwayne Jones, pastor of Mount Aaron Baptist Church. Below: Developers Nick Sinatra, left, and Rocco Termini say more can be done to encourage neighborhood investment.

BY JAMES FINK
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The Rev. Dwayne Jones wonders when the economic development resurgence in Buffalo will make its way to his East Side neighborhood.

The pastor of Mount Aaron Baptist Church is not alone. Sharing his concern is Marlies Wesolowski, executive director of the Lt. Col. Matt Urban Human Services Center of WNY.

"People see development in the (Buffalo Niagara) medical campus but they don't see it in my neighborhood," Jones said.

He and Wesolowski were among

six panelists at a Business First "Thought Leaders" event sponsored by Hodgson Russ LLP. Neighborhood development issues were the focus of the 90-minute discussion.

"Live, work and play all in the same neighborhood," Wesolowski said. "That's what makes a real neighborhood."

They decided to take some East Side development issues into their own hands.

Mount Aaron Baptist Church is working with Buffalo officials on developing a housing complex that targets low- to moderate-income residents, mostly senior citizens, at



with RACHEL HECKL, THE REV. DWAYNE JONES, RHONDA RICKS, NICK SINATRA, ROCCO TERMINI and MARLIES WESOLOWSKI

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"People look at the East Side and see vacant lots but I see something different. I see a viable community."

REV. DWAYNE JONES,
pastor,
Mount Aaron
Baptist Church



"It shouldn't take seven years to get approval for a project, but sometimes it does."

MARLIES WESOLOWSKI,
executive director,
Lt. Col. Matt Urban
Human Services
Center of WNY



"We have to stop looking at people as numbers. They are not numbers. We have to remember who these people are."

RHONDA RICKS,
founder,
R+A+R Development



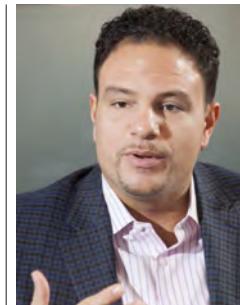
"Retail is tougher to bring to a neighborhood than housing. We need government to think more like a developer."

ROCCO TERMINI,
president,
Signature
Development



"Transportation is the second-largest expense in a household. We need to rethink that."

RACHEL HECKL,
director of expansion
initiatives,
Shared Mobility Inc.



"The 'toolbox' is very important to economic development and we are working with a very antiquated toolbox."

NICK SINATRA,
founder/president,
Sinatra & Co.



"In certain political circles, people want to take their foot off the development accelerator, but that's the worst thing they can do."

TERRY GILBRIDE,
partner,
Hodgson Russ LLP

645 Genesee St. in the shadow of the 300-member church. The \$11 million project, which will be reviewed by the Buffalo Planning Board on Nov. 6, features 50 apartments and 16 townhouses.

"People look at the East Side and see vacant lots but I see something different. I see a viable community," Jones said.

Wesolowski is working with Rhonda Ricks and R+A+R Development to turn the former School 44 on Broadway into an 82-apartment complex and community center. That project also will be reviewed by the planning board this month.

Joining Ricks as panelists were developer Rocco Termini and Rachel Heckl of Shared Mobility Inc. Heckl is developer of a Richmond Avenue church into an arts and cultural center.

Hodgson Russ partners Terry Gilbride and Elizabeth Holden joined the discussion.

Ricks and her development partner, Stuart Alexander, plan to turn the former Buffalo Forge property on Broadway into a housing community with low- to moderate-income options but which also caters to middle-income residents and those seeking market-rate housing.

"Our children are being priced out (of Buffalo)," Ricks said. "We have to find a way to keep them here."

On paper, developing affordable housing options makes sense. But in reality it is a much different story.

Government regulations and red tape can slow development down



Rhonda Ricks wants to turn a brownfield on Broadway into a community with housing options for a range of income levels.

to a crawl when it comes to gaining the necessary local, state and federal approvals for projects. The affordable housing marketplace can take years to navigate.

Projects that don't rely on government mandates can be developed in less than a year, said Nick Sinatra of Sinatra & Co.

"The process is like pounding your head into the pavement," he said. "I've become a very vocal advocate for cleaning up the process. We are still dealing with 1960s policy when it comes to affordable housing."

Housing is just one of the challenges facing the East Side and other Buffalo

neighborhoods.

All agree the East Side has a shortage of retailing options and amenities typically found in other neighborhoods.

"It's a food desert," Jones said. "We have a very viable neighborhood but good luck trying to find a place to buy milk or some fresh fruit – things that we take for granted."

"I'll admit that the chances of getting a Wegmans (on the East Side) is somewhere between zero and none, but that doesn't mean we can't get an Aldi or Save-A-Lot," he said.

Part of the problem: restrictive policies from agencies that are supposed to encourage economic development,

► CLOSER LOOK AT THE THOUGHT LEADERS

The Thought Leaders is a yearlong series of discussions with Western New York business leaders and attorneys at Hodgson Russ LLP.

Each month, leaders in diverse industries meet for a roundtable discussion moderated by Business First journalists. Excerpts from the conversation are published after the roundtable.

The next one will feature decision makers involved in the region's charter schools.

Discussions are held in the law firm's Pearl Street offices in Buffalo.

according to Termini.

"Retail is tougher to bring to a neighborhood than housing," he said. "We have underserved neighborhoods. We have the (development) tools but the government won't let us use them,"

Public and private transportation is another issue involved in neighborhood development.

Wesolowski said 54 percent of clients of the Matt Urban center do not own a car and rely on public transportation. That may lead to limited job opportunities for people looking to advance beyond low- to moderate income levels.

"We have to think more about transportation and the role it plays in the community," Heckl said. "Transportation, right now, is a stagnator toward development. Looking at how we move around is a human right."