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## Optimism abounds for south side neighborhood



**Mark Abramson**

**Kathi and Pete Koenig bought their home in the Silver City neighborhood last spring. They love the hardwood floors and proximity to Miller Park.**

## **Nonprofit ready to put new grant money to use**

By [Georgia Pabst](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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In November, Jose Rebollar opened El Pollo del Rey at S. 35th St. and W. National Ave., along the Silver City Main Street district, where he sells roasted chicken, tacos and tortas and features a salsa bar.

Early next year he hopes to transform the former Mekatos Colombian Bakery across the street into a pizzeria.

"There's a lot of traffic here," he says, sitting in a booth at El Pollo. Britney Xiong runs a translation services business on W. National Ave., and recently expanded to create a new flower design company that specializes in weddings, funerals and special event orders.

"It's something I always wanted to do and something I enjoy," she says.

Both business owners said they received assistance from Layton Boulevard West Neighbors, a nonprofit group that's been working on community development in the area, which has become a diverse marketplace.

While the Layton Boulevard West area includes the commercial hub, it's also a highly residential area consisting of three neighborhoods - Silver City, Layton Park and Burnham Park - an area bounded by S. 43rd St. on the west, Layton Blvd on the east, Lincoln Ave. on the south and Pierce St. on the north.

Many of the homes are turn-of-the-century bungalows and Victorians.

Kathi and Pete Koenig bought their first home - a three-bedroom Cape Cod house that's more than 100 years old - last spring for \$86,500.

The house, just around the corner from the Silver City Main Street area, had been on the market for three years, she says.

"We love the hardwood floors, the built-ins. We're baseball fans, so we can walk to Miller Park," she adds.

Both she and her husband work for the Milwaukee Repertory Theater.

"In spite of the economy, people have a high level of confidence in the area and still want to invest in business and buy a home," says Charlotte

John-Gomez, executive director of Layton Boulevard West Neighbors.

But clearly the economy has hit everyone, especially small-business owners. The association works to provide technical and other assistance so that business can be sustainable, she says.

The organization also works closely with residents to help them improve their homes and neighborhood through loans and other programs. But foreclosures are a concern. A year ago there were 19 foreclosed homes in the area. In September that number climbed to 42, she says. And there are many more in the pre-foreclosure stage, she adds.

The agency recently rehabbed three homes that were in foreclosure. It's also started an "adopt a foreclosed home" program where resident agree to keep an eye on a foreclosed property on the street and make sure it's clear of weeds, snow and graffiti.

Started in 1995 by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Layton Boulevard West Neighbors now has a staff of five and an operating budget of \$450,000 a year. It works to revitalize the low- and moderate-income neighborhood where there are about 17,000 residents. About 42% are white, and about 42% are Hispanic.

John-Gomez, a former Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic who worked at the city's Legislative Reference Bureau, has been director since 1999 and has helped build the agency into a driving force in the neighborhood.

In October the area received a major boost when it was chosen to participate in the 10-year, \$50 million Zilber Neighborhood Initiative designed to improve struggling neighborhoods in the city.

Layton Boulevard West Neighbors was chosen to lead the effort. It will receive \$875,000 over the next four years to hire staff dedicated to the initiative, and to pay for operating expenses and technical and planning assistance to create a quality of life program to guide the project.

The area was selected because it's highly residential with lots of single-family homes and a good housing

stock. But it faces challenges and a potential threat from foreclosures, says Susan Lloyd, executive director of the Zilber Family Foundation.

It also has 12 schools - a mix of charter, choice and public schools of varying quality - that can be improved, she says.

And it has commercial and business development, along with its proximity to the Menomonee Valley, where efforts are under way to provide jobs and economic growth, she says.

The area also was chosen because it's contiguous to one of the other Zilber neighborhoods, Clarke Square. In this way projects can be developed that will have a "spillover effect" and help stabilize and sustain growth over many years, Lloyd says.

In addition to the new Zilber initiative, other large-scale projects are under way in the neighborhood. With \$800,000 in city and state taxpayer money, crews are working along National Ave. at S. 35th St. to create a median that will be planted with flowers in the spring. Bump outs, harp lights and stamped concrete will provide other amenities to the street.

The project is designed to slow traffic and create a more pedestrian-friendly atmosphere, John-Gomez says.

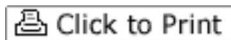
Nearby underneath the 35th St. viaduct, the Silver City Townhouses are just about ready for occupancy. The \$6.5 million complex of 20 rent-to-own units was developed through a partnership of Layton Boulevard West Neighbors and Wisconsin Redevelopment LLC.

"This was an area filled with broken glass and graffiti that attracted crime," says John-Gomez, looking at the spanking new three- and four-bedroom units. "We developed this in response to a vision created by the neighbors and the lack of affordable, new housing for families."

There's a waiting list of 40 for the apartment, she adds.

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