

## *As Downtowns Prosper, Voters Ask Mayors: What About My Neighborhood?*

By John Eligon and Mitch Smith

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The resurgence of downtown Kansas City, Mo., radiates from the luxury apartment towers with floor-to-ceiling windows and a rooftop pool. It is visible in the art galleries and clothing boutiques flanking the new 2-mile streetcar line, and in the open-air bar and restaurant promenade that is packed with people when the weather is nice.

But in the shadows of the city's thriving business and entertainment district are languishing East Side neighborhoods pocked with boarded-up homes and overgrown, trash-strewn lots. The shiny cafes and storefronts are almost nonexistent there, and residents like LaTonya Bowman feel forgotten.

"I love downtown, and I would love to see it grow, too, but you've got to be real," said Ms. Bowman, 49, who lives in the predominantly black East Side. "It's like neglect. We get the leftovers."

That tension between a vibrant downtown and the distressed neighborhoods that surround it lies at the core of the race to become Kansas City's next mayor, which the city's voters will decide on Tuesday.

At nearly every campaign stop, the two candidates in the race, like many municipal politicians across the country, have vowed to make sure that economic growth in their city extends to neighborhoods that have felt left behind.

From Chicago to Detroit to Birmingham, Ala., the downtown-neighborhood debate is playing out in the wake of efforts by many cities to stem economic slides and population losses by heavily subsidizing development. City officials have managed to revamp parts of their urban landscapes, sparking the construction of new office towers, condominiums and upscale businesses such as yoga studios. Meanwhile, other neighborhoods — often those whose residents are mainly black or Hispanic — continue to lack basic amenities like grocery stores and restaurants.

Elected leaders are now being confronted with a critical question: How will they ensure that the whole city benefits from the downtown building booms that have soaked up so many tax dollars?

"The cities are a little out of balance: The well-to-do are doing quite well, but there are a lot of neighborhoods in which poverty, crime, bad schools and a bad life experience is still too prevalent," said Dick Simpson, a former Chicago alderman who advised his city's newly elected mayor, Lori Lightfoot. "If the current people who are in power, the mayor and the aldermen in different cities, don't show a responsiveness to these issues, they're going to be defeated by reformers."

In Kansas City, it seemed only natural two decades ago that elected leaders would focus heavily on downtown. Back then, the center of the city was widely considered a hollowed-out wasteland of wig stores, haunted houses and surface parking lots where very few people lived or opened businesses anymore.

Residents started returning to downtown around 2007, with the opening of a new arena and entertainment district. Thousands of new hotel rooms and apartment units have since come online, transforming downtown into a flourishing community.

But the infusion of energy has come with costs. The city has to do without tens of millions of dollars a year in property tax revenue because of the incentives that lured developers to build downtown. There are major concerns about affordability: The rent for a 1,200-square-foot apartment in the city center can run north of \$3,000 a month. And all of downtown's economic success has only deepened the chasm between it and the surrounding neighborhoods.

Both mayoral candidates say the city should have done a better job of developing downtown and the neighborhoods at the same time.

Barely two minutes into a recent debate, one of the candidates, Jolie Justus, declared that she wanted to ensure prosperity for everyone, "regardless of what neighborhood that you live in." Her opponent, Quinton Lucas, quickly jumped in to say that everyone deserved a fair shot, "particularly those who live in neighborhoods that are historically disadvantaged." Both candidates are members of the City Council.

Attention on neighborhood issues tends to be cyclical. It is spiking now, economists and urban experts said, partly because of an increasing national focus on wealth and income disparities.

"People at the local level in many places don't feel that their life is improving, given the work they're putting in and the investment they're putting in," said Andre M. Perry, a fellow at the Brookings Institution who researches race and structural inequality. "People feel that they're on a treadmill in neighborhoods."



Quinton Lucas, a candidate for mayor, spoke to residents of the Blue Hills neighborhood of Kansas City, Mo., in May. He and his opponent, Jolie Justus, have both promised to address the city's downtown-neighborhood disparity. Christopher Smith for The New York Times

In 2014, the mayor of New Orleans fended off criticism about uneven development after Hurricane Katrina when he won re-election. In 2017, a young, liberal lawyer made uplifting neighborhoods the centerpiece of his mayoral campaign in Birmingham and comfortably knocked off the incumbent. Detroit's incumbent mayor was accused of prioritizing downtown over the neighborhoods during his re-election bid two years ago, but he easily secured a second term after highlighting accomplishments that included tearing down vacant houses and repairing broken streetlights. And in Chicago this year, Ms. Lightfoot, a political newcomer, won by taking a broad view of neighborhood concerns, vowing to curb crime, improve schools and rebalance development.

Ms. Lightfoot inherited a city that many residents felt had become a place of diverging fates. On the South and West Sides, many neighborhoods were troubled by population loss, by segregation and disinvestment, by high homicide rates and suspicion of the police. Residents resented that while construction cranes were filling the downtown skyline, dozens of schools were being closed in black and Hispanic neighborhoods.

An Urban Institute study found that, household for household, majority-white neighborhoods in Chicago received nearly three times as much private and public investment as majority-black neighborhoods, and low-poverty neighborhoods got more than double the investment that high-poverty ones received.

Ms. Lightfoot's effort to reverse the decline in outlying communities without undermining downtown growth faces skepticism from some business leaders whose fortunes soared while her predecessor, Rahm Emanuel, was mayor.

"I think it's a false choice — I think we can and we must do both," she said. "What I've been trying to emphasize is we are all in this together, we have to grow together."

The divides within cities nationwide are very much a product of mid-20th century white flight to the suburbs, and the inversion of that trend in recent decades as white people have flocked back to city centers. Municipal leaders and developers have happily seized on those new taxpayers, investing heavily in amenities to cater to them. That has fueled resentment among black and Hispanic residents who see the city investing where white residents have settled while neglecting the areas where they live.

Mr. Lucas, one of the Kansas City mayoral candidates, says that doing more for overlooked neighborhoods will have to mean saying no to some downtown proposals.

"Every politician of all time will say, 'I support incentives in the poorest areas,'" he said in an interview. "The distinction is, after a while, to support incentives in the poorest areas, you have to not support them in the nicer areas."

Mr. Lucas's plan includes investing in housing rehabilitation and affordable housing units, and offering incentives to developers to step out of their downtown comfort zone and build on the East Side, where limited investment has only hastened problems of poverty and crime over the years.

"I want to make sure that we're actually spending time focusing on how we build up our communities first," Mr. Lucas, who is black and from the East Side, told a group of mostly black East Side business leaders during a meeting one recent morning. "I don't say our community just because it's ours. But I think it's because it's the core of the city. If you don't have a strong inner city, then you run into problems."

For Ms. Justus, his opponent, who is white, the scale of the East Side's problems became clear during a neighborhood walk with a fellow council member and a community leader. They turned down a desolate street bounded by thick, unruly trees and brush and saw the detritus of illegal dumping and homeless encampments scattered everywhere — red plastic cups, a water heater, a torn sofa. At another corner, Ms. Justus pointed to an empty corner lot with high grass and a view of the downtown skyline.

“What would make this pop faster is if a whole bunch of people lived here,” she said.

Ms. Justus said she would appoint a deputy mayor for neighborhoods and would periodically run city hall for a time out of community centers in different neighborhoods. She said she would also consider tax abatements for new construction in distressed neighborhoods, and a cap on residential property taxes so that people are not taxed out of their homes. Investing in job training was important as well, she said.

“We will not be able to address the systemic issues, the infrastructure woes, if we don't also continue to increase our population base, our median income,” she said. “We have to be very intentional about making sure that that happens in every neighborhood.”

Part of the challenge in Kansas City is how diffuse the population is. Its population of nearly a half-million residents is spread across a land area about the size of New York City, which has 17 times as many inhabitants.

In order to create prosperous neighborhoods, the next mayor must persuade residents to care about the success of communities far from their own, said John James, 56, president of the Wendell Phillips Neighborhood Association on the East Side.

“I believe that if we put success downtown, if we put success in the airport, there's an opportunity for all of us to rise,” he said. “But it needs to be a unified chain of thought.”