135TH STREET | Strip poised to become Overland Park’s chief commercial area
CORRIDOR RIVALING THE BOULEVARD

By MEREDITH RODRIGUEZ The Kansas City Star  | Fri, Jun. 27, 2008

College Boulevard stills after work hours.

Metcalf Avenue and similarly intense corridors in the northern part of the county have waned somewhat in their commercial vigor through the years.

Only patches along 119th Street can compare to The Boulevard as sites of major corporate and retail businesses.

But city officials in Overland Park and Leawood agree — 135th Street is poised to become a chief commercial corridor in Johnson County and the primary shopping destination for residents to the south.

With offices and apartment complexes mixed in with the retail, the corridor should bustle 24 hours a day.

Rows of dense development will hug eight lanes from Olathe in the east to Leawood on the west.

Two meandering byways on either side of 135th will be traveled by residents of expansive neighborhoods that will be characterized by large-lot homes.

Where houses go, shops soon follow. And in southern Johnson County, where the houses are occupied by owners with considerable disposable income, those shops are becoming many.

As of now, skeletons of buildings are emerging next to finished projects along 135th Street. Vital tenants are trickling in, and plans for more are being approved regularly at City Council meetings.

All is built on a vision established more than 30 years ago.
The vision

In 1986, the land around 135th Street was every city’s dream — virgin land virtually free from development. Plus, U.S. 69 Highway and other key north-south roadways cut through it to provide easy access to the area like Metcalf Avenue, Antioch Road and State Line Road.

As the city marched southward, Overland Park and Leawood cooperated on a long-range plan with Olathe and the county to create a unified commercial corridor.

Namely, they coordinated the roadway.

Street lights would be timed. Lanes would be added. Frontage 133rd and 137th streets would not only relieve traffic but provide buffers between shopping centers and homes 70 percent filled with families that typically disdain density in their back yards.

The plan also set environmental standards.

It aimed to preserve the Tomahawk Creek flood basin. Today, Tomahawk Creek runs through the green patch on the map made up of St Andrew’s Golf Course, the Deanna Rose Children’s Farmstead and Overland Park’s anticipated tourist draw — the 12-field youth soccer complex.

The plan intensified

Originally, the creek was going to run through a three-square-mile park. The envisioned park would have run from Pflumm to Antioch roads south of 135th and would have included a 180-acre recreational lake.

But citizens dictated otherwise in an election to fund the proposal in 1986, later the same year that the plan for the corridor was presented.

Landowners and residents dubbed the plan “Mega Park,” and voted it down. Dissenters saw it as a move by Big Brother, recalled Overland Park Traffic Engineer Mark Stuecheli. The land now is largely filled in by development.

Also dictating higher densities was the market. Office complexes outlined on the original plan lacked necessary economic demand.

“It has grown to be a little more retail than initially envisioned over the years,” said John Rod, Overland Park’s director of long range planning. That particularly was the case in Leawood and Olathe, he said.

A commercial corridor in the south is a predictable move by Overland Park, which often is referred to as a city made “by business for business.” It also depends on sales tax as its largest revenue source.

“A having corridors like that is what allows us to minimize the property tax mill levy,” Overland Park City Manager John Nachbar said.

Leawood conversely sees itself as a residential bedroom community, Leawood City Administrator Scott Lambers said. But it embraced the retail-based revenue idea, too. The city recognized 135th Street as its only opportunity to vary its tax base.

“North of I-435 had been lost (to houses),” Lambers said. “We needed to diversify.”
**Leawood is different**

Still, each city developed according to its own tastes.

You won’t see a Lowe’s or a Wal-Mart on the Leawood side, Lambers said.

“Things like that we just don’t have. We’re trying to make our corridor different from the rest.”

Leawood’s 135th Street will resemble a boulevard dominated by high-end boutique stores. Power lines will be buried so as to be out of view.

“When they leave Missouri (on the west side of Leawood), they are going to know they entered,” Lambers said. “When they leave Overland Park, they are going to know.”

Five plans are currently approved in Leawood. Three are under construction, including Parkway Plaza and Mission Corner, which will be two of the few true mixed-use destinations along the corridor. The mixed-use design with offices and apartments stacked atop stores is meant to create an urban feel in suburbia.

On its east end, abutting Overland Park at Nall Avenue, the Cornerstone Center is practically finished. Its pedestrian spine down the middle also is meant to provide an urban walking experience, said Leawood City Planners Mark Klein and Sajiv Joseph.

The Villagio development on the southeast side of Mission and 135th will include an assisted living facility. It is one example of the varied family demographics that dense corridors like 135th aim to draw.

In Leawood, about half a million of the roughly 13 million total square feet of planned development are condominiums and apartment complexes, which target young singles and empty-nesters.

**Overland Park introduces culture**

In Overland Park, all the land around 135th is zoned. About 2 million square feet of retail and office space is yet to be developed.

Prairie Fire is one of the plans that has been approved but not built, and it is foreseen as one of the lots that will draw people beyond the immediate area — particularly because the American Museum of Natural History claimed space in it.

“The perceived weakness (of Johnson County) is that it doesn’t have some of the cultural things,” said Andrew Nave, the Overland Park Economic Development Council’s Business Recruitment and Retention Manager. “This is one of the top two or three museums in the world.”

On weekends, people can live, work and play in the mixed-use development and then attend a world-acclaimed New York-style exhibit, Nave said.

The soccer complex adds yet another dimension to the corridor by drawing tourists from around the country for its tournaments.

“The spin-off for that project alone could be astronomical,” Nave said.

The Crystal Springs development lining Pflumm resembles College Boulevard with one of largest office complexes along 135th.
Corbin Park and the Shoppes at Deer Creek Woods are positioned in a prime spot — along Metcalf Avenue.

“135th and Metcalf just blows everything out of the water in Johnson County,” Nave said. “This location has some of the best retail metrics in terms of disposable income and population growth.”

**Income indicates success**

Planners are banking on the success of the corridor based on demographics around it.

“We obviously have a community with a high level of disposable income,” he said.

And numbers prove it.

Within a three-mile radius from the intersection of 135th and U.S. Highway 69, the average household income is $157,945, compared to $76,337 in the Kansas City metropolitan area. That is 213 percent of the national average, according to an April 2008 study by the Overland Park Economic Development Council.

And those households will presumably shop on 135th Street.

Other corridors further south in Johnson County such as 159th and 151st street in Overland Park have potential for dense developments as well. But none other has that vital east-to-west connection.

“It is nowhere near the connection that 135th Street provides,” Lambers said.

To reach Meredith Rodriguez, Neighborhood News reporter, call 816-234-7722 or send e-mail to mrodriguez@kcstar.com

All Rights Reserved. http://www.kansascity.com