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New jobs might hinge on eminent domain

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Developer Jerome Solove plans to ask the city to wipe out 200 modest homes in Milo-Grogan to make room for a bustling shopping center on an idled industrial site along I-71.

Neighbors are split on the plan, which a city official has called controversial because it involves taking the land by eminent domain.

Solove bought the former Timken Co. manufacturing plant on 31 acres at E. 5th and Cleveland avenues this fall. Since then, he's asked the city to declare the neighborhood just east of the site, between Cleveland Avenue and I-71, blighted.

The city then could take the land by eminent domain and name him master developer there.

The idea is controversial, Columbus Development Director Mark Barbash said.

"Nobody wants to do eminent domain," Barbash said. "Columbus is such a conservative community that to start a project with eminent domain is the wrong place to start.

"The first thing you talk about is what's best for the neighborhood," he said.

Solove would like to make it an urban shopping destination with a "big grocery store, card shop, bakery, market with fresh fruits and vegetables, hardware, pharmacy, barber/beauty shop, general merchandise, specialty retail, retail banking, pizza, dollar store, hotel, medical/urgent care, laundromat," said a draft proposal given to the city.

But it would displace a community of people who are predominantly elderly or on fixed incomes. It includes 10 to 20 homes built by the Greater Columbus Habitat for Humanity.

Solove said he began meeting with Timken neighbors a year ago. He wants to understand community interests before he announces any specific plans for the site. But he has a general idea of what he wants.

"Retail is the solution," he said. "The opportunity for job creation in that location is very extensive."

For some, Solove is a godsend, offering what they see as the first real hope to bring jobs and services to the area. Milo-Grogan, some say, has been on the decline since the 1960s when I-71 cut it in two.

"It's crime-ridden. It's an area that's been left out, no question about that," said Leroy Johnson, a member of the Milo-Grogan Area Commission who has lived in the area since 1954.

Johnson doesn't fear demolishing homes since many are abandoned. And, he notes, the plan isn't final.

Johnson said Solove is proposing services the area has long



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Corvas Brinkerhoff, 21, a Milo Arts Center resident, paints while, from left, Ben Fox-McCord, Josh Devaney and Dave Lewis relax. Brinkerhoff's windows overlook the Timken development site.



Rick Mann, owner of the Milo Arts Center and head of the area commission, plans to fight a developer's plan for the Milo-Grogan area.



Source: Jerome Solove

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needed: "The closest post office is at High and 4 th. We had a lot of elderly; we need one closer."
But just the mention of eminent domain angers others.

"You're talking about destroying a historic community. . . . This plan isn't going to work," said Matt Vaccaro, also an area commissioner and a resident.

Vaccaro is not ready to move. He raised his older son and daughter in a home on St. Clair Avenue for 11 years and wants to raise his younger children there.

The draft talks of "demolition and construction of retail buildings" and "relocating residents from the west side of I-71" to the "east side of 71," but it does not spell out homes being razed, Vaccaro said.

To make sure residents understand the details, Rick Mann is assembling groups to go door to door to explain the fine print.

Mann and his wife spent thousands in legal fees fighting the city when officials tried to evict them in 2000. They own the Milo Arts Center, a former elementary school, where artists work and live.

Now head of the Milo-Grogan Area Commission, Mann and his wife vow to fight again.

But real-estate researcher Ken Danter said Timken is a natural for retail redevelopment.

"With the proximity to the central city, just look at the sheer mass of population. With those attributes, you can't not look at a site like that," he said.

"To bring that site out to I-71 would be a huge attribute," he added.

What the city can and can't do could be spelled out next year.

Battles over eminent domain for development are ongoing in Cincinnati and outside Cleveland. In September, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to look at when local governments can take homes and businesses for new projects.

For now, Solove said, he wants to follow Barbash's advice and wait until city planners develop a Milo-Grogan plan.

Although he hasn't formally requested city assistance yet, Solove established a redevelopment corporation for the Timken site "to best coordinate public involvement," he said.

Milo-Grogan isn't scheduled for a community plan, and won't be unless community members ask for one, Barbash said. Thus far, they haven't.

The earliest a plan could be completed would be late 2005, Barbash said, and only after that would the city entertain requests from Solove for tax abatements or other incentives.

Still, the city enthusiastically supports redeveloping the site. The Timken factory once employed 5,400 to make railroadcar wheel bearings. It had 220 workers when it closed in 2001.

"The last thing I want to do," Barbash said, "is get down on a redevelopment opportunity."

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