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Article Summary: Other cities took advantage of federal redevelopment funds in the 1950s and 1960s, but Omaha did not have the necessary public support for redevelopment. Business leaders who wanted to maintain private control over the planning process battled civic leaders who underestimated the negative public attitude toward urban renewal. Three times the people voted against the establishment of an independent redevelopment authority with the power to expropriate private property. Subsequent attempts to bypass the electorate further alienated residents. Poor housing and declining neighborhoods in North Omaha and South Omaha remained unimproved after years of conflict.

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Photographs / Images: map of Near North Side Omaha, 1940-1979; Little Italy, South Omaha, 1940

Government, Interest Groups, and the People: Urban Renewal in Omaha, 1954-1970

By Donald L. Stevens, Jr.

All cities face the problem of deteriorating residential and commercial districts. Over the years individuals and groups for a variety of reasons have urged government intervention in housing and slum improvement. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries social reformers blamed poor living conditions for a host of social ills. They led many of the movements to enact municipal regulations that required minimum standards of health and safety in housing and tenement construction.¹ Housing conditions continued to worsen even after a number of states adopted minimum standards laws.² The housing supply of many cities failed to adjust to the growing number of industrial workers and foreign immigrants. By the start of World War I Edith Wood and other professional reformers prescribed a national housing program that went beyond regulation. They interpreted the federal provision of emergency housing for war industry workers as an indication of the failure of private enterprise to supply adequate shelter for urban laborers. The professional housers pushed the national government to adopt constructive housing legislation to allow public construction of decent, low cost dwellings.³ The federal government did not act on the housing issue after the war. It took the Depression and the demand for an economic stimulus to help convince Congress to pass a housing act in 1937 and a severe housing shortage to prompt further legislation in 1949. Both laws empowered the Federal Housing Authority to finance housing construction, but their potential was stifled by war—first World War II and then the Korean conflict. Each of the bills received stiff opposition from private building interests who denounced public competition in the housing industry.⁴

A provision in the 1949 law provided for rebuilding residential areas and changed the opposition in many private interest groups. In fact with the passage of the Housing Act of 1954, realtors who sensed the potential for profit in subsidized redevelopment replaced professional reformers as the principal promoters of federal aid to cities.⁵ The new law shifted the emphasis from public housing and stressed the removal of slums and the revitalization of central business districts.⁶ It provided federal funds to municipal governments that would condemn and seize sections of a city deemed substandard. The city then could transfer the title, at a nominal price, to private entrepreneurs, who would receive additional federal money to help redevelop the area in

compliance with a federally approved plan. Local chambers of commerce and real estate and building interests reacted more favorably to the broadened redevelopment program, which allowed ten percent of the federal grant-in-aid to finance nonresidential development.⁷

In Omaha, Nebraska, as elsewhere, a variety of business, labor, professional, and government leaders accepted the 1954 law as a practical way to rebuild deteriorated areas. Yet, unlike most urban areas that pursued federal redevelopment during the 1950s and 1960s, Omaha failed to establish an authority to administer urban renewal. This paper will examine the disharmony between elected and private city leaders as well as the intense public opposition to urban renewal as principal causes for the failure. The attitude of Omahans toward urban renewal corresponds with common criticisms of the program. Many people questioned the use of eminent domain for private development and noted the problems of relocation and compensation. Moreover, they believed that acceptance of city-wide redevelopment was tantamount to signing a blank check. Except for a project proposed in 1958, the promoters never defined how they would use urban renewal. The open ended nature of the program, which could be used to rebuild downtown or raze residential neighborhoods, frightened many people.

The housing problem of the midwestern city differed from those of the larger eastern cities. Omaha housing, built during the real estate booms of the 1880s and the early 1900s, consisted primarily of one, two, and three family dwellings that spread from the center of town. The cramped inner city tenement did not proliferate in Omaha.⁸ The structural and geographic factors prevailing in the early housing trends of Omaha influenced greatly the patterns of deterioration in the mid-twentieth century, as the problem of substandard housing initially developed in the old neighborhoods north and south of the downtown district.

In one respect Omaha did resemble eastern cities. North Omaha, which housed most of the minority residents of the city, contained the highest percentage of dilapidated dwellings. The growth of the city's black population and its concentration in old neighborhoods mirrored the national trend. Between 1910 and 1920 the number of black Omahans doubled from 5,143 to 10,315. After World War I a tight job market intensified friction between the races. The tension culminated in 1919 with a mob lynching of a black man accused of raping a white woman. The racial pressures which accompanied the migrations of blacks to the city resulted in greater residential segregation.⁹ Black Omahans inhabited some of the worst housing in town. In a 1931 study sponsored by the Omaha Urban League, a local sociologist related a higher than average infant mortality rate among blacks to poor living conditions and to an ignorance of health care practices. The Urban

League stressed improved housing as a major goal along with better health care, education, and employment.¹⁰ During the difficult years of the Depression, meager support from the National Urban League and from local white and black communities limited the ability of the Omaha league to address these problems.¹¹

The business and political leaders of Omaha were generally apathetic toward deteriorating housing conditions until after World War II. During the ten years following the war, a few civic leaders took notice of the housing problem and suggested corrective measures. In 1946 Mayor Charles W. Leeman, at the suggestion of Omaha business leaders, organized fifteen committees to perform a city-wide improvement study.¹² A Housing and Slum Area Elimination Committee, chaired by realtor Alfred C. Kennedy and consisting of other realtors, business executives, small proprietors, and professional people, identified scattered sections of dilapidated housing and recommended that "urgent" action be taken to renew the two worst areas, one north and the other south of the downtown.¹³ Improvement of the northern residential section, where most of the black residents of the city lived, posed the most serious problem. With help from local residents, the Housing Committee found nearly one-fourth of the 2,490 houses surveyed were either uninhabitable or in need of major repairs.¹⁴ The investigators pointed to the inability of the people to acquire mortgage loans and neglected municipal services as major obstacles to improvement. They recommended a corrective mortgage plan as well as compensation and alternative housing for homeowners displaced by condemnation.¹⁵ The Omaha Urban League also tried to generate interest in housing betterment among private organizations and city officials.¹⁶ The requests, however, went unanswered.

The City-Wide Improvement Plan won lavish praise, and its supporters launched an intensive campaign to promote passage of related bond issues in an election on November 5, 1946. The projects included improvement of streets, sewers, parks, and river docks as well as new equipment and facilities for the police and fire departments.

The plan also called for the construction of an auditorium and civic center and for expansion of the airport.¹⁷ The housing and neighborhood improvement recommendations gained little consideration. The *Omaha World-Herald*, the city's only daily newspaper, labeled the proposals of the housing committee "over-zealous." It noted that the report called for urgent action but did not ask for public funds and suggested that the postwar housing shortage influenced the committee's findings.¹⁸ Moreover Mayor Leeman's attitude against public tampering in the housing industry contributed to the deemphasis of residential improvement.¹⁹ In the fall election voters approved eight of sixteen bond proposals, and the mayor appointed four citizen commissions to spend the funds.²⁰

NEAR NORTH SIDE

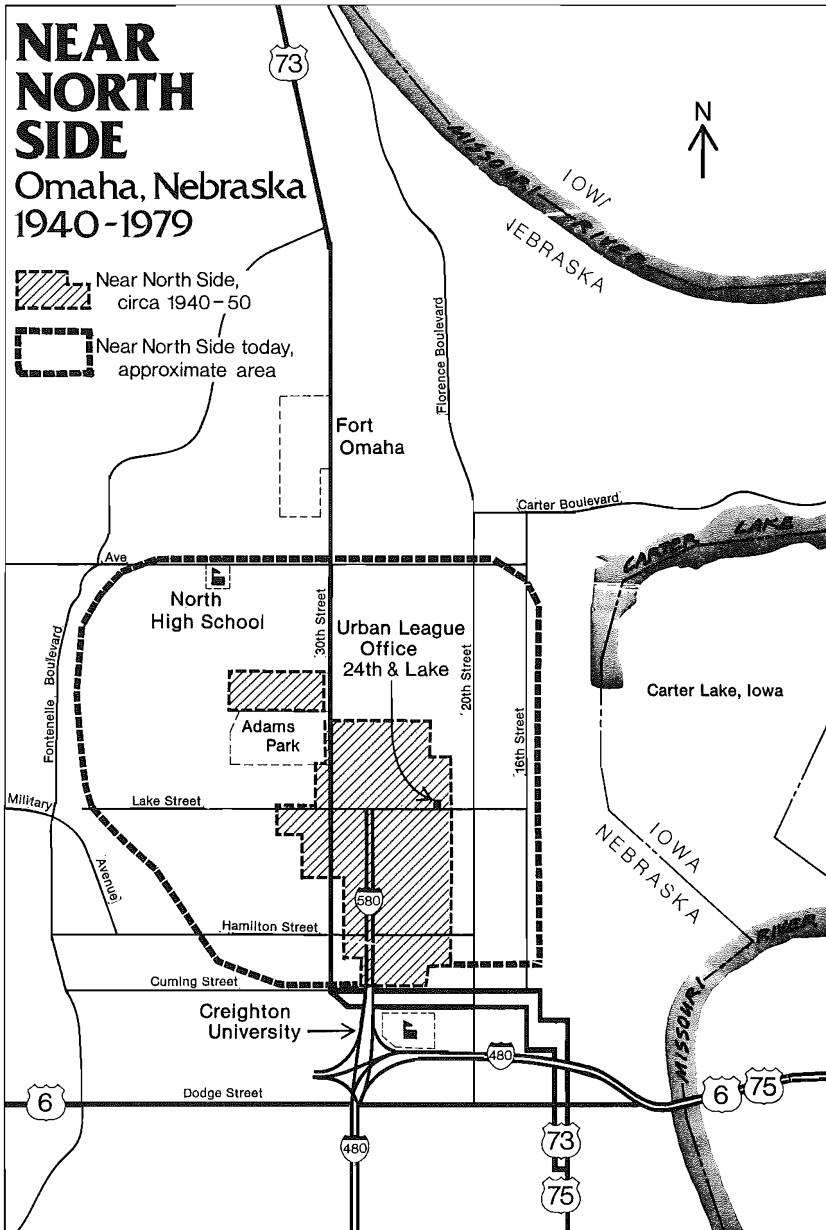
Omaha, Nebraska
1940-1979



Near North Side,
circa 1940-50



Near North Side today,
approximate area



The city continued to ignore the housing problem until Glenn Cunningham, Mayor Leeman's successor, endorsed state slum clearance legislation in the state legislature shortly after the federal government offered the city just over \$1 million.²¹ The prospect of federal money also interested the Omaha Real Estate Board, but the realtors insisted on several revisions in the original bill. The city administration agreed to changes that provided for an agency independent of the Omaha Housing Authority to administer slum clearance and that limited its jurisdiction to inside the city.²² The bill received further overhauling on the floor of the legislature. Omaha Senator John J. Larkin, Jr., a co-sponsor of the bill and the son of an Omaha Housing Authority member, successfully introduced an amendment that reestablished the authority as the administrative body.²³ The amendment remained in the Slum Clearance and Redevelopment Act when it passed in May 1951.²⁴ The law also provided that the city council must sanction any slum clearance projects. The governing body of the city used its consent powers to stymie slum elimination initiatives in the immediate years after the legislative success. Later in 1951 the Omaha City Council passed an ordinance authorizing the housing authority to conduct a program; however, the same council deterred action by refusing to approve the areas that the authority proposed to renovate.²⁵

During the early 1950s several private organizations, such as the Omaha Real Estate Board and Omaha Chamber of Commerce, initiated short-lived volunteer rejuvenation activities in north Omaha and in other inner city neighborhoods.²⁶ Still, housing conditions worsened from neglect in the years following the war. Ironically the unrelated improvements initiated in 1946 indirectly influenced the debate to create an urban renewal authority in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The citizens commission which Mayor Leeman had created in 1946 to allocate the bond money held duties other than the administration of the improvement funds and often conflicted with the functions of the elected city commissioners. Confusion in municipal administration developed and contributed to the adoption of a new home rule charter in 1956.²⁷ One year later the inauguration of a strong mayor/city council form of government reflected attitudes that sought, not more agencies, but more efficient city government.

Many civic and political leaders of the city supported redevelopment after the passage of the 1954 urban renewal act. Between 1955 and 1958 Omahans reassessed the development needs of the city, familiarized themselves with federal urban renewal, and initiated plans for a project. During these years the promoters first encountered strong public opposition that divided city officials and in 1958 weakened what might have been the most united front in support of federal renewal that public and private leaders ever attained. Sometime in 1955 Omaha Mayor John Rosenblatt appointed Joseph

Mangiamele to the new Urban Renewal Office and investigated the local responsibilities in area redevelopment.²⁸ The federal government required cities to fulfill "workable program" criteria before they included the enforcement of housing and health codes and the formulation of a master plan forecasting urban growth. The city had to develop a broad base of citizen participation and display a financial willingness to perpetuate the improvements. The local community had to provide a body to administer the program as well as provide housing for displaced persons.²⁹

The mayor created the Area Redevelopment Committee to update the 1946 improvement report and to determine the extent of blight in Omaha. Milton Livingston, owner of a wholesale appliance company and a strong supporter of Mayor Rosenblatt, acted as chairman of the study group, which included realtor Charles Peters as vice chairman and fourteen other city officials and business leaders.³⁰ In February 1956, while the Area Redevelopment Committee prepared its report, Omaha civic leaders aroused business community interest at an "All Day Conference" on urban renewal. The speakers discussed urban deterioration and described federal aid as a practical solution. A spokesman for the National Retail Dry Goods Association of New York promoted the prospects for downtown revitalization. The Omaha-Douglas County health director, Dr. Edwin D. Lyman, associated the removal of blight with public health and joined others emphasizing the potential for residential renewal.³¹

The Area Redevelopment Committee study came out later in 1956 and reported that housing deterioration had spread in the area north and southeast of downtown and around the old South Omaha business district. Relying on 1950 census reports and on Urban Renewal Office surveys, the committee judged forty-seven percent of houses in the areas sub-standard because of plumbing, crowding, or structural deficiencies.³² The committee recommended that the city prepare to meet the federal workable program qualifications. They called on city hall to enforce the recently enacted Minimum Housing Standards Ordinance and stressed the need for the active cooperation of politicians and citizens.³³

Rather than begin a campaign to persuade local politicians and citizens of the potential of urban renewal, the city, through the activities of the Omaha Housing Authority, planned a project for an area east of Creighton University. The chamber of commerce had shown an interest in the redevelopment of this locale since 1945.³⁴ The housing authority hired the Leo A. Daly Company, a local architecture and engineering firm, to survey this mixed commercial and residential district located on the northern fringe of downtown.³⁵

The sensitive nature of government intervention in housing became evident after the Area Redevelopment Committee issued its report.

The findings offended some blacks, who declared that the areas named in the report reflected a racial bias. The committee members denied the discrimination charge and claimed merely to have considered the "housing stock."³⁶ Additional criticism came from the Small Property Owners Association (SPOA), represented by attorney Peter Marchetti, which filed suit against the minimum housing standards ordinance, tying up the law in court for over two years.³⁷

In the spring of 1957 the new charter went into effect. It required Mayor Rosenblatt to prepare a six-year capital improvements plan. City department heads, led by newly appointed planning director Alden Aust and the Omaha Development Council, a group of businessmen, coordinated their efforts in the winter and spring of 1958 to perfect the Omaha Plan.³⁸ The final report contained a \$40.5 million bond proposal to help finance streets, sewers, and parks as well as urban renewal. Three of the bonds, totaling over \$8 million for public libraries, urban renewal, and a cultural center, formed the redevelopment portion of the plan.³⁹ The Omaha Housing Authority prepared the groundwork for the renewal program.⁴⁰ In the tentative plan an interstate highway, stretching between Chicago and Cass streets, lying between the central business district and Creighton University, divided the project area. South of the freeway the planners envisioned a complex of public and cultural buildings, and to its north they wanted a residential and commercial district with parks and primary school facilities.⁴¹

City-wide promotion of the Omaha Plan started several months before a special bond election scheduled for June 1958. A private group, Friends of the Omaha Plan, spearheaded the campaign for the bond issues. The *World-Herald* endorsed the bonds and published the names of members of the promotion group, which included Leo A. Daly; Peter Kiewitt, owner of an international construction company; and A.F. Jacobson, president of Northwestern Bell Telephone. The organization sold the Omaha Plan as a package, arguing that the city needed a physical house cleaning "to compete as a first-class community."⁴² The city council, lead by its president, A.V. Sorensen, unanimously passed a resolution that accepted the "broad scope" of the plan.⁴³

Just prior to the public hearing on the improvements, city attorney Herbert Fitle learned that a 1957 amendment to the state redevelopment law, sponsored by the SPOA, required that voters approve the creation of an urban renewal authority. The discovery prompted the city to include a proposal for an authority along with the bond proposal on the June ballot.⁴⁴ The creation of a redevelopment agency became the focal point of the controversy.

Interest in the urban renewal issue grew after a boisterous hearing in the city council chambers. Over 300 people listened for more than three

hours to arguments over the Omaha Plan. The *World-Herald* reported that most opposers of the bonds lived in the neighborhood, which housed 750 families and 1,000 individuals, targeted for redevelopment. Some opponents charged that renewal planners had not fully disclosed the project's cost and denounced them for trying to tax the people into debt.⁴⁵ Following the public hearing, several councilmen wavered in their support for the Omaha Plan, but the council voted five to two in favor of the improvement package. A.V. Sorensen and N.P. Dodge were the most outspoken council supporters. Two South Omaha politicians, Albert Veys and James Dworak, delivered the "no" votes. Councilman Veys specifically criticized the urban renewal section; he wanted elected officials, rather than an independent authority, to operate the renewal program. Dworak bemoaned the cost of the proposals and opposed the total improvement plan.⁴⁶

In June the voters overwhelmingly defeated all the bond issues by almost a five to one margin. Every section of the city rejected the proposals; only precincts at Omaha University and at Dundee Presbyterian Church tallied votes in favor of all the bonds. The urban renewal bond lost by a vote of 56,880 to 12,046.⁴⁷ Residents in the inner city districts of North and South Omaha rejected redevelopment by the greatest margins. South Omahans voted thirteen to one against the issue, and North Omaha had a defeat ratio of six to one.⁴⁸ The overall failure of the plan makes it difficult to separate the defeat of urban renewal from the total package. Realtor Alfred Kennedy and other proponents of the plan, commenting on the results during a chamber of commerce committee meeting, faulted the campaign strategy for using "too many big names... and not enough...ordinary citizens" as spokesmen for the bonds. They also believed that the people felt threatened by the size of the Omaha Plan⁴⁹ and distrusted the proponents' explanation of the full financial burden. Mayor Rosenblatt lamented the lost opportunity for federal funds. However, the mayor's inaction suggests that he did not rigorously pursue redevelopment. Rosenblatt waited until 1960 to appoint Harold Kort, a milk sanitarian, as director of the Urban Renewal Office vacated in 1956 by Joseph Mangiamale, who criticized the administration for its lack of city planning. The mayor never established an urban renewal citizens participation council as suggested by A.V. Sorensen.⁵⁰

The 1958 defeat only briefly distracted the advocates of renewal, and by the end of the year they were attempting to remove the provision in the state law that required voter approval of an authority.⁵¹ The prospect of federal money induced the mayor, backed by a majority of the city council, to propose state legislation establishing the council as the administering agency. Concurring with the city's financial interest in urban renewal, the Omaha Chamber of Commerce endorsed the legislation. Clair Oneal of the chamber's Urban Development and

Planning Committee felt that Omaha needed a program to compete with the thirty-eight states that had already begun redevelopment projects.⁵² The Omaha state legislators, however, delayed in introducing the legislation and did not present the bill to the unicameral until after Mayor Rosenblatt sent a three-man delegation to Lincoln to spur the senators into action.⁵³

The bill met stiff organized opposition at a hearing of the state legislature's Committee on Government. Attorney Peter Marchetti, representing the SPOA, led a group of opponents. Marchetti, a veteran of flamboyant presentations before the legislature, presented his group as "the people's opposition to the city hall's organized bill." Expounding the fundamental sanctity of private property, he attacked the use of eminent domain, under the guise of urban renewal, as an abuse of the police power. A Lincoln missionary indulged the committee with a story of a widow, the mother of two children, who could be in danger of losing her home if the bill succeeded. Another opponent, a past victim of eminent domain, criticized the insufficient compensation paid by the government.⁵⁴ What proved a fatal objection came from the powerful state senator from Scottsbluff, Terry Carpenter. He had helped the SPOA push through the 1957 amendment, which required voter approval before a city could embark on urban renewal. In 1959 Senator Carpenter again endorsed the popular vote provision.⁵⁵ Responding to this criticism, supporters of the bill argued that the city council would be more responsive to the people than would an independent authority, and they stressed the financial benefits that the city could expect with a "workable urban renewal act."⁵⁶ The Committee on Government, stating that the proposed legislation would grant the municipalities too much power, killed the bill.⁵⁷

During the next two years the apparent unity between city hall and civic leaders on urban renewal weakened and then disintegrated because of a legislative initiative of the chamber of commerce and the results of city elections. Renewal proponents in the chamber were convinced that only by removing the popular election requirement in the enabling legislation could the city hope to establish a redevelopment program. In 1960 they decided to pursue the issue in the next legislative session despite dissent from Sorensen and Dodge, the strongest advocates for renewal on the city council.⁵⁸ Sorensen, after traveling to Washington for a careful investigation of federal urban renewal, argued to postpone the legislation until 1963. He realized that the city needed much more preparation before it could comply with the workable program prerequisites. The city had not yet begun structural inspection under the minimum standards law nor had the planning department completed a master plan. Above all city officials could not claim to have public support for redevelopment.⁵⁹

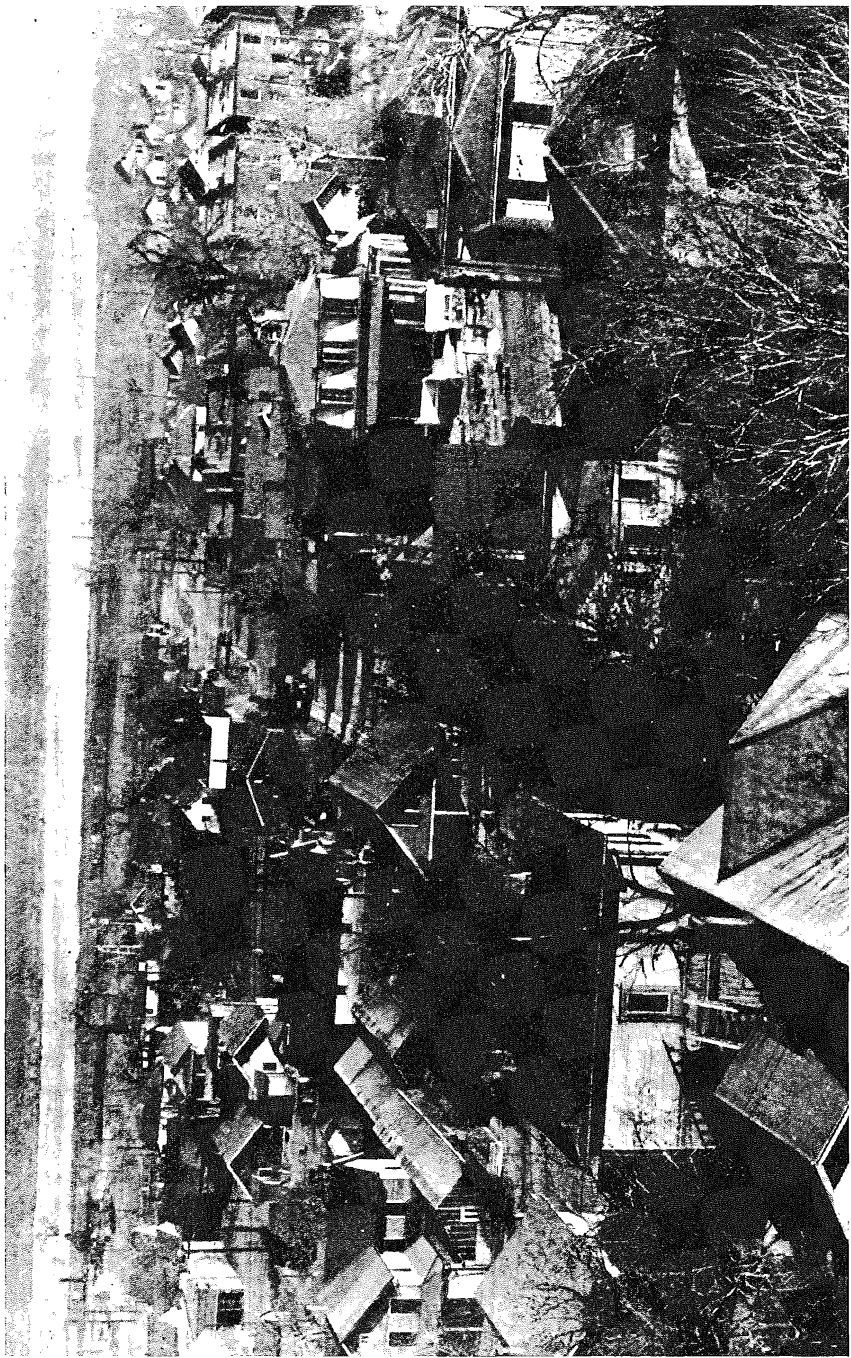
In 1961 many Omahans reaffirmed their disapproval of urban

renewal, which developed as a major issue of the municipal elections. The mayoral race posed a distinct choice between city councilman James Dworak, a mortician who nurtured a reputation as an outspoken maverick in city government, and James Green, an attorney in favor with the Omaha civic and political leaders. Dworak defined his candidacy as an alternative for the "people who are sick and tired of being dictated to by a handful of financial and social giants."⁶⁰ He stuck to an anti-federal aid position and proposed to renew blighted areas with the minimum standards housing ordinance and private capital.⁶¹ The election went to Dworak by a slim 616 vote margin.⁶²

Before and after the election, the Urban Development and Planning Committee of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce prepared to remove from the state law the requirement of a public vote to establish an urban renewal agency. The initiative of the chamber differed from the 1959 effort because it would empower the city council to create an independent authority.⁶³ The chamber group proved highly efficient at mobilizing a wide range of business, labor, and civic organizations to support the legislation. Representatives of the Omaha Real Estate Board, Creighton University, Associated Retailers of Omaha, Inc., and the local AFL-CIO agreed to speak in support of the bill at the state committee hearing.⁶⁴

At a chamber strategy meeting the problems faced by black residents who would be removed by slum clearance surfaced during a discussion of internal conflict in the Omaha Urban League. George Robinson, executive secretary of the league, said, "Negroes needed a guarantee on the availability of alternative housing."⁶⁵ Attending a previous meeting, Harold Kort, the urban renewal director, admitted that the housing situation in Omaha made relocation difficult. The few public housing units in the city fell far short of supplying an accessible alternative because of a long waiting list.⁶⁶ The administrator of the local branch of the Federal Housing Administration said that displaced people who wished to remain in the same locale often would be prohibited from obtaining loans because many of these areas were ineligible for FHA approval.⁶⁷

Testimony at the state legislature's committee hearing for the redevelopment bill reflected mixed feelings about the impact of urban renewal on blacks. Dr. A.B. Pittman, the first black president of the Omaha Urban League, believed that housing conditions would improve for those removed by renewal because of the law's housing guarantee for the displaced.⁶⁸ C.C. Adams, a black minister and spokesman for the Home Owners' Protective Association, was more pessimistic than Dr. Pittman. Adams referred to the history of restrictive housing in Omaha and asked where blacks would be allowed to live after losing their homes. White proponents of renewal offered no concrete location plan.⁶⁹



Little Italy, South Omaha, 1940.

The housing dilemma of black Omahans impressed the legislators less than the broad front of business, labor, and civic leaders organized by the chamber of commerce. During the committee hearing a representative of the Omaha chamber stressed that the city council, as the ultimate overseer of renewal, would safeguard the rights of the people. The bill empowered the city council to approve the selection of redevelopment sites.⁷⁰ Other supporters commented on the many benefits of urban renewal. Lincoln and Omaha realtors spoke of the potential for commercial and residential revitalization, and a labor leader noted the employment possibilities.⁷¹

As he had two years before, Peter Marchetti fought the revisions for the SPOA and for what he deemed the American way of life. He and Arthur Hanson, association president, condemned the encroachment of the federal government. One speaker, Mike Stefack of Omaha, who represented several civic clubs, cited the vote against the Omaha Plan and the election of Dworak as proof of the people's unreadiness for the federal program. Several opponents noted the high social status of backers of the bill and viewed the debate as a struggle between the wealthy and the wage earner.⁷²

The lobbying activities of the chamber of commerce continued after the government committee sent the bill to the floor of the unicameral for consideration. Upon learning that the SPOA had joined forces with several Douglas County senators to defeat the bill, members of the Omaha chamber decided to contact other senators. Father Henry W. Linn of Creighton University proposed to call on prominent alumni throughout the state to pressure legislators for the bill's passage.⁷³ Press coverage of the debate on LB 433 revealed that the threat to the bill rested not with the out-state senators but within the Omaha delegation. Terry Carpenter, who helped thwart the renewers in 1959, was not a senator in 1961. The bill passed with a comfortable twenty-three vote margin. Four of the seven Omaha senators opposed the legislation.⁷⁴

Although passage of the bill rekindled the expectations of the chamber of commerce and other renewal advocates, the odds of reaching their objectives proved slight. It could be argued that the decision to bypass the electorate and to try to establish an authority through the city council only increased public animosity towards the program and its supporters. In the summer of 1961 the renewers faced a hostile Dworak administration and a recently elected city council with just two solid supporters—the former city council administrative assistant, Arthur D. Bradley, Jr., and the new council president, Harry Trustin.⁷⁵

As the new mayor of Omaha, James Dworak moved quickly to dismantle the Urban Renewal Office. Without the consent of Harold Kort, he transferred the two inspectors Kort had hired the previous

year to the Permits and Inspections Department. The action reduced the renewal office staff to just the director and a secretary.⁷⁶ He further enraged redevelopment supporters by putting Arthur Hanson in charge of inspections under the minimum standards housing ordinance. This showed Dworak's unwillingness to move forward with housing improvement; Hanson, as president of the SPOA, headed the organization that had brought a suit against the minimum standards ordinance in 1956.⁷⁷ The mayor seemed intent on controlling the power to inspect and condemn houses and thereby avoid improvement demands on citizens he did not wish to offend.⁷⁸ To the dismay of Dworak, stripping the urban renewal director of his staff only intensified the pressure for action on housing and redevelopment. Outraged city councilmen and city-county health officials persuaded the mayor to return the urban renewal office to department status. Dworak also pledged to initiate a housing inspection program and accepted an enforcement partnership with the health department.⁷⁹

In September 1961, after reviewing a federal project planned in Des Moines, Iowa, councilman Arthur Bradley announced that he would introduce an authority ordinance.⁸⁰ Both the Omaha chamber of commerce and City Planning Director Alden Aust endorsed immediate actions. Aust sided with business leaders in describing the federal program as the only available means of revamping the residential blight and industrial slums of the inner city. He said it was necessary to attract industry to the downtown.⁸¹ The city council divided on the authority proposal. Councilman H.F. Jacobberger first opposed the establishment of an independent authority because he felt it was contrary to the provisions and purpose of the 1956 city charter.⁸² A veteran councilman, Warren Swigart, favored delaying the vote on an authority until after city officials had better educated the people on the purposes of redevelopment.⁸³ The disunity forced Bradley to offer an alternative ordinance for an urban renewal advisory board. The board, lacking any substantial powers, would collect information, aid government agencies, and hold hearings on urban renewal. It also would provide the city council with updated information on the spread of blight in Omaha.⁸⁴

The Bradley ordinance aroused a variety of critics. One zealous opponent, Harry Lobel, alleged that redevelopment leaders participated in covert communist activities. Lobel, an electrician and leader of the Citizens Committee to Stop Urban Renewal, said:

If given the opportunity to appear before the City Council, I would like to present proof of suppression of scientific discoveries vital to the defense of America, of the publication of fraudulent scientific claims, and of espionage activities on the part of leaders of urban renewal here in Omaha.⁸⁵

The electrician's charges were discounted as mere verbiage.

A month later over a dozen Omahans spoke against the advisory board at a public hearing on November 28, 1961. Several citizens restated the frequent objection that considered the seizure of private property, when resold to private developers, an injustice. A woman who had lost her home to the interstate highway criticized the use of federal aid at the expense of the individual. Another opponent feared that Washington bureaucrats would direct renewal, while others deplored the selfish motives of promoters and the avoidance of a vote.⁸⁶ One week after the hearing the city council unanimously passed and the mayor signed the advisory ordinance.⁸⁷

Following creation of the advisory board, Omaha politicians discussed trying another revision of the state redevelopment law in the next legislative session. Unhappy with the prospects of an appointed authority, Councilman Veys continued to encourage the establishment of the city council as the administrative agent. Several councilmen, including Bradley, supported the idea even though a similar attempt had failed in 1959. The Omaha chamber of commerce, however, disliked the proposal and argued that under the existing law the council controlled significant portions of the redevelopment process. City officials went ahead with the idea, but Omaha senators refused to introduce the legislation.⁸⁸

Chamber reaction to the council's initiative illustrated the preference of Omaha business leaders for private control of the city planning process. This attitude weakened the working relationship between political and private leaders and hampered cooperation in approaching the problem of deteriorating commercial and residential sections of Omaha. Friction between the public and private sectors surfaced when the Urban Renewal Advisory Board recommended a community renewal study. The federal community renewal program made cities eligible for aid after preparation of a city-wide survey. It also required a local education effort to inform the public of the need and benefits of redevelopment.⁸⁹

City lawmakers approved the appropriation for the study, but implementation was delayed by a procedural dispute that mirrored a long standing anti-public planning attitude among Omahans.⁹⁰ The federal government's acceptance of the application for the study funds came in early August 1962; however, the Urban Renewal Advisory Board, the planning board, and the mayor sparred through the remainder of the year over who should conduct the study. Planning board member Milton Livingston favored enlarging the planning staff and letting the city planning department, with minimal help from private consultants, direct the survey. Glenn Goodrich, chairman of the advisory board, argued that the city would take too long and would not do as well as a consulting firm.⁹¹

A similar controversy erupted over a second study proposed by the Central Omaha Committee of the chamber of commerce. Downtown businessmen, threatened by the decline of the inner city and the emergence of suburban shopping centers, called for a comprehensive community profile to provide a general plan to prepare downtown interests to take advantage of an expected population growth.⁹² An impasse ensued when Mayor Dworak, who wanted the city planning department to conduct the study with private funds, and the chamber, which preferred a federally-financed private consulting firm, failed to reconcile their disagreement.⁹³ The city council eventually accepted the business group's position on both studies.⁹⁴

While the two procedural disputes dragged on the primary issue of an urban renewal authority dominated Omaha politics during the end of 1962 and the beginning of 1963. City Council President Harry Trustin, a long-time advocate of waterfront development, and Urban Renewal Advisory Board member Charles Peters insisted that Mayor Dworak reverse his anti-federal aid stance and lead the people to accept an authority and a redevelopment program.⁹⁵ A flood of activity followed. In January 1963 Councilmen Stephen Novak and Ernest Adams joined the pro-renewal side. This put the council at four to three in favor of an authority, but a fifth vote was necessary to override a certain veto by Mayor Dworak.⁹⁶ The mayor and the city council came under heavy pressure to act when the planning board and the Urban Renewal Advisory Board separately recommended the immediate establishment of an authority. The League of Women Voters, the Omaha Real Estate Board, the chamber of commerce and television station WOW-TV endorsed the proposal. Expressing strong support, *The Omaha World-Herald*, under the new ownership of Peter Kiewit and Sons Company, provided front page coverage of the issue.⁹⁷ Arthur Bradley finally introduced an ordinance in the second week of March.⁹⁸ He felt confident of success because Councilman H.F. Jacobberger had privately promised to switch and vote with the majority after the expected veto.⁹⁹ Jacobberger, by waiting, would not look like an advocate of the authority.

The long awaited showdown took place at a stormy five-hour hearing. The regular company of opponents and proponents attended the meeting and produced a heated dialogue. Peter Marchetti and his group promised the continuation of a referendum petition started previously to ensure a popular vote on urban renewal. Early in the morning after the testimony ended, a predicted four to three council vote passed the authority ordinance.¹⁰⁰ As expected, Mayor Dworak vetoed the act.¹⁰¹

Word leaked that Jacobberger might be the fifth vote, and he was pressured to reconsider his commitment. A leading architect and

engineer in Omaha approached Jacobberger during a luncheon and told the councilman that regardless of whether urban renewal benefited the community as a whole, he planned to profit substantially from federally subsidized redevelopment. This firsthand encounter with potential abuses of the program along with reports of failure and corruption in other cities unsettled Jacobberger. Moreover a number of people living in deteriorated neighborhoods influenced him with pleas for a negative vote. Individual customers of Jacobberger's dry cleaning business also applied considerable pressure—many threatened to take their laundry elsewhere if he voted for the authority.¹⁰² On a Saturday morning the councilman visited Arthur Bradley and explained that the people would ruin him if he voted to override.¹⁰³ Jacobberger then sided a second time with Veys and Swigart, and the council sustained the Dworak veto.¹⁰⁴

The 1963 veto was not the final word on the issue, but promoters of city-wide redevelopment never regained the level of intensity that peaked with the council vote. Unwilling to accept defeat, the chamber of commerce changed strategy. After spending five years trying to bypass the voters, the chamber decided to woo the electorate with an education campaign. The business organization conducted presentations for employees of various businesses in hopes of enlightening industrial workers with the social and economic purposes of area renewal.¹⁰⁵ The city council was more eager to drop the issue and soon was embroiled in a new but related controversy—fair housing. Reflecting a national trend in northern cities, civil rights activism intensified in Omaha during the early and mid-1960s. Protest demonstrations organized by black leaders brought the issue of discrimination to the forefront of the urban renewal debate in the 1960s.¹⁰⁶ The Omaha Urban League now refused to endorse redevelopment until the city adopted an open housing ordinance and a relocation program.¹⁰⁷ However, city lawmakers decided not to draft a fair housing ordinance, and the chamber's Urban Development and Planning Committee decided to disassociate its pursuit of urban renewal and the open housing issue.¹⁰⁸

Throughout most of 1964, renewal advocates avoided public debate of the issue. In April the city council reactivated the Urban Renewal Advisory Board, which had disbanded after the 1963 council vote. Attorney Robert Peterson, a former advisory board member and past chairman of the chamber of commerce subcommittee that initiated the 1961 revised state redevelopment law, presided over the new advisory board. The board, working closely with the chamber, helped the urban renewal education campaign.¹⁰⁹

The Omaha chamber of commerce hoped to keep the issue out of the political arena until it felt that the public was sufficiently informed of the program's benefits. Yet in mid-September an argument at a city

council meeting over housing conditions in the Near North Side led to a call for a public vote on urban renewal. In a report presented to the council, Urban Renewal Director Harold Kort concluded that few structures on the North Side were deteriorated enough to require condemnation. Councilman Bradley complained that the survey overlooked many of the worst sections of north Omaha and argued that it underestimated the area's housing conditions.¹¹⁰ At the next council meeting Jaccobberger announced that a poll predicted most of the people would now accept a redevelopment authority. Anticipating completion of the community renewal study, he recommended that the public vote on urban renewal in the spring election.¹¹¹ The call was quickly forgotten because of the outbreak of a rezoning scandal that involved Mayor Dworak. The *World-Herald* disclosed alleged political payoffs that resulted in the indictment of the mayor, two councilmen, a planning board member, and a realtor.¹¹²

In April 1965 the taint of the bribery scandal lingered in the city as the results of the community program appeared with little fanfare and as Omahans prepared for another vote on an urban renewal authority. The study deemed that fifteen percent of all Omaha housing and thirty-five percent of the homes of minorities were substandard.¹¹³ Urban renewal was placed on the spring ballot, and a campaign promoting acceptance of a redevelopment authority in the upcoming election began with the release of the community renewal study. The electioneering was somewhat more subdued than during prior urban renewal debates. Facing reelection, city councilmen kept a low profile on the authority issue. The chamber of commerce and other business and labor organizations that had previously endorsed redevelopment provided most of the support. Omaha religious groups were more visible in 1965 than in earlier campaigns. The Catholic archbishop, the Omaha Area Council of Churches, and the Synagogue Council of Omaha publicly endorsed urban renewal. Several clergymen, who spoke in favor of renewal, emphasized providing decent housing for the people ultimately displaced. Unlike most of the advocates in the business and labor community, they also promoted fair housing legislation.¹¹⁴ However, black clergymen opposed the authority. Rudolph McNair and Kelsey Jones of the Citizens Coordinating Committee for Civil Liberties declared that redevelopment would only create new black ghettos because of the restricted housing market. The Omaha Urban League also declined to support the authority.¹¹⁵ The anti-redevelopment sentiment was fueled by reports of corruption and the problems of rehousing the displaced in other cities.¹¹⁶ The SPOA, once again warning against the destruction of property rights and an increase in taxes, took a negative stance. The election came on May 11, and people throughout the city voted down urban renewal, 64,319 to 31,121. Not one of Omaha's fourteen wards tallied a majority

in favor of the proposal. South Omaha voted six to one against federal redevelopment¹¹⁷

In the election mayoral candidate A.V. Sorensen defeated the beleaguered incumbent James Dworak who, though acquitted of bribery charges, left town shortly after the election. The new mayor pledged to pursue slum elimination without a federal program and successfully promoted private investment in residential renewal.¹¹⁸ During his term Sorensen solicited funds from the chamber of commerce and wealthy businessmen to rehabilitate deteriorated housing through nonprofit corporations. Their efforts displayed a renewed cooperation between city hall and private leaders. The scale of the investment, however, was meager relative to the size of the problem.¹¹⁹ In the search to obtain financing for low income housing improvements, Mayor Sorensen became frustrated with the federal government over its refusal to grant funds unless the city adopted a formal urban renewal program.¹²⁰ Sorensen's dispute over the inflexibility of federal redevelopment regulations in adapting to local circumstances was illustrated by the fate of an urban renewal project initiated by South Omaha businessmen.

In 1969 the mayor supported the introduction of an abbreviated form of urban renewal that would establish a redevelopment authority with limited powers. South Omaha interests, suffering from a declining packing industry, succeeded in amending the state redevelopment law to include language on limited urban renewal.¹²¹ The law provided for the creation of an authority to administer a single program and then disband. In contrast to previous attempts to authorize an agency with city-wide jurisdiction, the legislation designated a specific area in South Omaha for industrial redevelopment. It disallowed the creation of another redevelopment authority for additional projects until after the completion of the first program. Moreover to insure a quick decision, it stipulated that Omaha officials must accept the program unless the city council vetoed it within fifteen days after the passage of the bill.¹²² The bill passed. The Omaha city council responded positively to the abbreviated approach and unanimously established an authority for South Omaha in June 1969.¹²³

Trouble developed when an acting assistant regional administrator of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development informed Mayor Sorensen that the project would not qualify for federal aid. The HUD official argued that the residential areas of blacks in North Omaha were in greater need of action. Sorensen adamantly disagreed and promised to fight for the program. He approved of the location because of the land available for development and because of the area's unemployment problems.¹²⁴ However the HUD administrator refused to allocate the federal funds.

The timing of the application for the federal grant, which coincided

with city elections in the spring of 1969, contributed to the quick demise of the limited urban renewal plan. The decision occurred months after the election of Eugene Leahy as mayor of Omaha. Sorensen had chosen not to run for reelection. Unlike the former mayor, Leahy had not promised to take the federal bureaucrat to task over the issue. The new Omaha administration and city council did not appeal the decision to higher levels of the Washington bureaucracy and let the plan die.¹²⁵

The abrupt end of the limited program was immediately followed by a new round of promotion for the introduction of city-wide urban renewal. As a mayoral candidate, Leahy had opposed urban renewal, but as mayor he changed his position. Mayor Leahy observed that the federal program had great potential for assisting waterfront districts on the fringe of downtown. Just days after the termination of the South Omaha project, Leahy surprised the city council by asking for an authority ordinance.¹²⁶ The council, however, was apprehensive about acting on renewal without the blessing of the public. One month later, in November 1969, a *World-Herald* poll indicated that a majority of the workers would support urban renewal. This encouraged the mayor and the city council, and they agreed to put the issue before the public in a May election.¹²⁷

In April final public debate over the formation of an independent urban renewal authority began. Political leaders displayed a united front and tried to differentiate between the old and the new style of redevelopment. Mayor Leahy created the Community Information Committee on Urban Renewal to spearhead the election campaign. The city council now expressed a more positive attitude. The seven council members unanimously endorsed the creation of an authority with a resolution that called for neighborhood planning and for control of redevelopment programs.¹²⁸ The sponsors maintained that they offered a new type of urban renewal that emphasized the development of vacant areas and rehabilitation, rather than the old large-area demolition and redevelopment.¹²⁹ The Omaha chamber of commerce was less visible in the 1970 campaign. Black leaders and the Taxpayers Union, founded to protest the proposal, were the most visible opponents. The relationship between the city's white leadership and the black community generally deteriorated during the 1960s. In 1966 and 1968 racial tensions erupted into riots on the Near North Side, and by 1970 an atmosphere of complete distrust existed between many black leaders and the supporters of urban renewal.¹³⁰ Peter Marchetti once again surfaced as a leading challenger and spoke in behalf of the Taxpayers Union.¹³¹ Shortly before the election Mayor Leahy said he believed the people would support the authority, but on May 12, 1970, the electorate voted two to one against urban renewal for the third and final time.¹³²

As they had five years before, the promoters of renewal misread public attitudes. The mayor placed too much emphasis on the polls and too little emphasis on the history of urban renewal. He had only recently enlisted in the renewal cause and tried to present an approach that was more responsive to public participation and concentrated on rehabilitation. But the results of the election illustrated a continued deep-seated public disapproval of an independent redevelopment authority with the power to expropriate private property anywhere in the city.

The Omaha case is interesting because it is atypical of most cities that pursued federal redevelopment in the 1950s and 1960s. In other cities public-private partnerships often inaugurated urban renewal programs.¹³³ The troubled relations between Omaha's public and private leaders stemmed in part from the preference of business leaders for private control over the planning process. In Omaha the slow development of public planning and the tendency to contract planning duties to private firms reflected such thinking. The same attitude was illustrated by the objection of the chamber of commerce to appointing the city council as the administering agent of federal redevelopment programs. Above all the formation of a strong leadership coalition was hampered by the politicians' belief in the necessity of public accountability and the private leaders' frequent disregard of public opinion.

Civic leaders failed to appreciate the negative public attitude towards urban renewal. They spent too little time persuading people at the grass roots level of the need for redevelopment and never carefully explained the objectives of the program. The failure of renewal advocates to firmly commit themselves to a renewal plan fueled public apprehensions. The promoters, except for the preliminary plans to redevelop the area near Creighton University in 1958 and the limited project for South Omaha in 1969, never agreed on what they wanted to renew. Moreover the proponents' ardent efforts (in particular the legislative activities of the chamber of commerce) to bypass the electorate further alienated the people. The widespread publicity of negative urban renewal experiences in other cities solidified public opposition. The depth of public feeling was evident in the pressure brought to bear on the city council in 1963 and in the three popular elections that rejected a redevelopment authority.

The failure of urban renewal in Omaha during the 1950s and 1960s is due to a number of factors. Low and moderate income Omahans, antagonized by business promotion of renewal programs, saw that business leaders were most likely to profit from redevelopment. The egalitarian attitude of renewal opponents was reflected in election voting patterns in 1958, 1965, and 1970. In each of the three public votes

on an urban renewal authority, the strongest opposition existed in South Omaha, composed mostly of working class families, and in North Omaha, a similar district accommodating most of the city's black residents. Citizens of these neighborhoods feared the possible loss of their homes and questioned promises of adequate replacement housing. Black Omahans in particular faced a severely limited housing market.

In general the public reaction to the urban renewal controversy revealed a desire for a fiscally conservative municipal government in the 1950s and 1960s. It also suggested a strong populist influence on Omaha politics. These years were largely a time of increasing residential and commercial development in the west and southwest fringes of the city. The downtown lost its preeminence as a commercial district, and the problems of the inner city and redevelopment were overshadowed by the annexation and growth of new areas. In the minds of many people familiar with the community upheaval and human misery that accompanied area redevelopment elsewhere, the rejection of urban renewal might be read as a success story for Omaha. Yet the fact remains that Omaha failed to confront the growing problem of poor housing and declining neighborhoods, which was central to the process of improving life for the disadvantaged urban dweller.

NOTES

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⁴Timothy L. McDonnell, *The Wagner Act: A Case Study of the Legislative Process* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1957), 45-47, 54-62, 393-95; Richard O. Davies, *Housing Reform During the Truman Administration* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1966), 3-12.

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¹⁴Mayor's City-Wide Planning Committee, "Improvement and Development Program for the City of Omaha" (Omaha, Nebraska, 1946), 55-56, 160, 162.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Mihelich, "World War II," 417.

¹⁷*Omaha World-Herald* (Evening), April 10, November 6, 1946.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, March 29, April 29, 1946.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, May 7, 1951.

²⁰*Ibid.*, November 6, 1946; Harold J. Muir, "The Formation and Adoption of the 1956 Omaha Home Rule Charter 1954-1956" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1969), 6-8.

²¹*Omaha World-Herald* (Evening), March 27, 1951.

²²*Ibid.*, March 29, April 25, 1951; Legislature of Nebraska, Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, *Committee Report*, March 26, 1951, Legislative Bill 469, 62nd Session; The Housing Authority administered the public housing program in Omaha and was not under the direct control of city government.

²³*Omaha World-Herald* (Evening), May 15, 1951.

²⁴*Ibid.*, May 26, 1951.

²⁵Legislature of Nebraska, *Slum Clearance and Redevelopment Law Legislative Bill 469* (1951) 62nd Session, section 6; Interview with Charles Peters, N.P. Dodge Company, Omaha, Nebraska April 13, 1980; David Beber to A.V. Sorensen, February 11, 1958, A.V. Sorensen Papers, Public Library, Main Branch, Omaha.

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³⁹*Ibid.*, June 1, 1958.

⁴⁰Legislature of Nebraska, *Slum Clearance and Redevelopment Law Legislative Bill 469* (1951) 62nd Session, sections 2, 4; *Urban Renewal and Redevelopment Law Legislative Bill 431* (1957) 68th Session, section 3.

⁴¹*Omaha World-Herald*, February 13, April 27, 1958, S.S.

⁴²*Ibid.*, April 23, May 16, 1958.

⁴³*Ibid.*, March 9, 18, 1958.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, March 12, 1958.

⁴⁵*Omaha World-Herald*, April 23, June 1, 1958, S.S.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, April 30, March 12, June 6, 9, 1958.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, June 18, 1958.

⁴⁸Urban Development and Planning Committee, 1958-59, Minutes, Meeting of September 25, 1958.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰*Omaha World-Herald*, March 25, December 13, 1950; *North Omaha Sun*, June 16 1960, S.S.

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⁵⁵Legislature of Nebraska, General File Amendment to LB 431 by Senator Terry Carpenter, adopted April 23, 1957, clipping attached to Legislative Bill 431, Library, Nebraska Legislature; Interview with Peter Marchetti.

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⁶¹*Ibid.*

⁶²*Omaha World-Herald* (Evening), May 5, 10, 1961.

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⁶⁵Urban Development and Planning Committee, Minutes, Meeting of April 20, 1961.

⁶⁶Ibid, Meetings of March 16, November 17, 1960; Interview with Dr. Claude Organ, physician, Omaha, Nebraska, November 20, 1980.

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⁶⁹Ibid., 1-4, 7, 9.

⁷⁰Ibid., 3.

⁷¹Ibid., 2-5.

⁷²Ibid., 7-9.

⁷³Urban Development and Planning Committee, 1960-61, Minutes, Meetings of May 18, 26, 1961.

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⁷⁵*Sunday World-Herald*, June 25, 1961; Interview with Warren Swigart, City Councilman, Omaha, Nebraska, May 31, 1980.

⁷⁶*Omaha World-Herald* (Morning), June 22, 27, 1961.

⁷⁷Ibid., September 28, June 22, 1961.

⁷⁸Interview with Arthur D. Bradley, Jr., former city councilman, Omaha, Nebraska, May 20, 1980.

⁷⁹*Omaha World-Herald* (Morning), August 11; November 2, 4, 8; December 2, 1961.

⁸⁰Ibid., August 24; October 3, 1961.

⁸¹Ibid., October 3, 19; November 21, 1961.

⁸²Interview with H.F. Jacobberger, former city councilman, Omaha, Nebraska, March 18, 1981. Jacobberger was a member of the charter convention and heard much testimony favoring the elimination of independent commissions.

⁸³*Omaha World-Herald*, August 18, 24, 1961.

⁸⁴*Omaha World-Herald* (Morning), October 19, November 22, 1961; *Sunday World-Herald*, November 26, 1961; Urban Development and Planning Committee, 1961-62, Minutes, Meeting of November 16, 1961.

⁸⁵*Omaha World-Herald* (Morning), September 19, 1961.

⁸⁶Ibid., November 29, 1961; *Omaha World-Herald* (Evening), November 29, 1961.

⁸⁷*Omaha World-Herald* (Morning), December 6, 1961.

⁸⁸Ibid., January 31, November 8, 1962; January 4, 1963; Urban Development and Planning Committee, 1961-62, Minutes, Meetings of November 16, December 22, 1961.

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⁹⁵Ibid., September 12, 13, 1962.

⁹⁶Ibid., November 8, 15, 28; December 14, 1962; January 11, 1963.

⁹⁷Ibid., January 10, 13, 27; March 24, 1963; *Omaha Profile*, July 1962-June 1963; February 18, 1963.

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- ¹²³Ibid., June 2, 1969.
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- ¹²⁶*Omaha World-Herald*, September 14, October 8, 9, 10, 13, 1969, S.S.
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- ¹²⁹Ibid., April 15, May 8, 1970.
- ¹³⁰Ibid.
- ¹³¹Ibid., April 30, May 8, 1970.
- ¹³²Ibid., May 13, 1970.
- ¹³³Walter McQuade, "Urban Renewal in Boston," in James Q. Wilson, *Urban Renewal, the Record and the Controversy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; The M.I.T. Press, 1966), 311-12; Roy Lubove, *Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh: Government, Business and Environmental Change* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1969).