COORDINATING PUBLIC WORKS AND URBAN RENEWAL IN KANSAS CITY, KANSAS

December 1959
Journal of the
CITY PLANNING DIVISION
Proceedings of the American Society of Civil Engineers

COORDINATING PUBLIC WORKS AND URBAN RENEWAL IN
KANSAS CITY, KAN.

Eldridge H. Lovelace, F. ASCE and Ramon Duran

SYNOPSIS

The Housing and Home Finance Agency through the establishment of the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan procedures has provided a useful and effective means to coordinate the timing and location of public works with urban renewal programs. The Argentine neighborhood in Kansas City, Kansas serves as an excellent demonstration of the local benefits to be realized from these procedures. These point to and emphasize again the importance of proper scheduling of both public works and urban renewal activities as a part of urban planning and development activities.

INTRODUCTION

On June 5, 1958 the Kansas City Times, a morning newspaper, reported to the citizens of Kansas City, Kansas that the City Commissioners had enthusiastically endorsed a ten year $11 million General Neighborhood Renewal Plan for the Argentine section of the city, estimated to cost the city taxpayers as little as $755. This announcement culminated several months of “crash” planning work by the Planning Commission staff under the direction of the consulting firm of Harland Bartholomew and Associates and with the assistance of the local Urban Renewal Agency.

The City of Kansas City, Kansas, the second largest city in the Kansas City area, was developed from what were originally five small towns. (See Figure 1.) The present population of the city is approximately 135,000. Certainly no single factor has influenced the degree and pattern of development of the metropolitan area as much as the natural features of the land. The city is bounded on the north by the Missouri River and bisected by the Kansas

Note: Discussion open until May 1, 1960. To extend the closing date one month, a written request must be filed with the Executive Secretary, ASCE. Paper 2307 is part of the copyrighted Journal of the City Planning Division, Proceedings of the American Society of Civil Engineers, Vol. 85, No. CP 2, December, 1959.
1. Partner, Harland Bartholomew and Associates, St. Louis, Mo.
2. Director of Planning, Kansas City and Wyandotte County, Kans.
desirable that this large urban renewal area be planned for urban renewal purposes in its entirety. Federal funds are generally advanced for the preparation of such plans. Public improvements serving the neighborhood may receive credit as part of the city's participation in individual projects required to carry out the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan. This credit is allowed for improvements built anytime after the Housing and Home Finance Agency has approved the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan, even though individual renewal "projects" may not even be initiated, in parts of the neighborhood, for several years after this public improvement has been completed. However, the local community must proceed forthwith to initiate a specific project encompassing at least ten percent of the area of the neighborhood involved and then proceed in a progressive and consistent manner to carry out the entire neighborhood plan.

The Kansas City, Kansas ten million dollar public works program was underway when Local Public Agency Letter No. 110 describing the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan procedures was received. In addition, the school district had approved a $6,500,000 bond issue in 1953 and a second issue (of $6,850,000) was under consideration (and was subsequently passed). Study of the opportunities afforded by the Neighborhood Renewal Plan procedure in relation to the public works program by planning and renewal officials in Kansas City, Kansas led to the conclusion that, if the timing could be properly scheduled, a neighborhood plan should be prepared for the Argentine area. The city administration agreed to postpone the letting of certain key public works contracts; the officials of the Fort Worth office of the Housing and Home Finance Agency promised complete cooperation. There was no time to secure federal planning funds; the City Planning Commission agreed that its staff and consultants should prepare the Neighborhood Plan with the assistance of the staff of the Urban Renewal Agency and the race against time was on. (The letting of the key public works contracts could not be postponed very long and, once let, no federal credit could be obtained from them.)

The Argentine Neighborhood

The General Neighborhood Renewal Plan area chosen is located in the southwest section of the city called the Argentine district, one of the original towns which comprise the present Kansas City, Kansas. (See Figure 2.) It is situated on the south bank of the Kansas River three miles from its confluence with the Missouri River. In the late 1800's the location of the Atchison-Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad transfer depot, roundhouse, and coal sheds played a prominent initial role in developing the Argentine area. A smelting or refining company also located in the area about this time which received ore from the mountain area to the west and crushed, separated, and refined lead, gold, and silver. Thus, the name "Argentine" was derived from the silver smelter operation. The original plat of Argentine dates back to 1880 and included a portion of the flood plains and the south bluffs of the Kansas River. The plat contained the basic gridiron arrangement of streets which in most instances was poorly related to the rough topography, resulting in roads with steep grades, and poor building sites. (See Figure 3.) The lots in the plat were generally 25 feet wide. In 1909, Argentine and Kansas City, Kansas were consolidated. In 1851, after an excess of normal May and June rainfall, a critical storm began on the 9th of July. The rain continued and by July 12th,
the swollen waters of the Kansas River topped the levees and flowed swiftly through the area inundating the north section of the district to depths of five to thirty feet. Eight hundred persons were evacuated with no lives lost, the district was left in shambles, and the estimated damage was about $62,500,000. Only the lower portion of the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan area was affected by the flood waters. Today, almost eight years after the devastation, many of the inundated houses have been re-occupied, some receiving extensive repairs and others none or the basic minimum. Also, many of the industrial and commercial buildings in the original business district have been re-occupied and some new commercial buildings have been built. The commercial area has traffic congestion problems and lacks sufficient off-street parking facilities.

Within the Argentine district, an area of approximately 475 acres was chosen for the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan because of its need for renewal and because of the location of the proposed improvements that would finance the city's share of the program. The General Neighborhood Renewal
Plan area forms a logical planning unit because it is bounded by natural barriers—the Santa Fe Railroad on the north, a limited access dual lane expressway on the east, (the Eighteenth Street Toll Expressway), a proposed limited access highway on the south, and a major street on the west. Because of the extreme topography and obsolete platting, less than half the area selected is improved.

Approximately 35 percent of the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan area has an average slope in excess of 15 percent. The area slopes from the south to the north with a difference in elevation of approximately 250 feet. The area contains 949 residential structures with 412, or 43.4 percent substandard or dilapidated,¹ and 109 non-residential structures with 40, or 36.7 percent substandard. (See Figure 4.) Therefore, of the 1,058 main buildings, 452, or 42.7 percent, were classified as substandard. The estimated number of families was 1,040, 940 white and 100 non-white.

Although street and alley rights-of-way represent over 23.3 percent of the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan area, less than half of the roads are paved and practically all of the alleys are unimproved or unopened.

The water mains are generally in satisfactory condition and provide adequate services in the developed sections in the more level areas. However, any extensive reuse of the isolated or undeveloped areas on top and along the bluffs will require additional water facilities. Although there are some sewer facilities in the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan area, the sewers accommodate both storm sewer and sanitary flow and it is not uncommon for manhole covers on the main business district street, at the base of the bluffs, to be hurled from their places by geysers of water as a result of a rainstorm and the fast runoff.

Public parks within the Argentine area are inadequate. The one athletic field, with an area of eight acres, has covered bleachers, a lighted baseball field, softball field, and toilet facilities. There is also one neighborhood park containing five acres. However, a fire station is located in the northeast corner, a library building in the center, and, adjacent to this small area, is an elementary school on a site of only 0.4 acres. The school building, built prior to 1900, is obsolete and inadequate. Another elementary school, in the northwest section of the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan area, is on a site of seven-tenths of one acre. The latter site is occupied by two separate buildings—an old building constructed in 1888 and a three-room frame building constructed in 1952. This school, because of its proximity to industry and nearby schools, should eventually be abandoned and the students taught in other elementary schools. The General Neighborhood Renewal Plan area also contains a high school on 2.3 acres of land. This school was recently remodeled at a cost in excess of 1-1/2 million dollars and is in excellent condition. This new facility, however, is in serious need of off-street parking. Although the high school site is limited in area, an athletic field containing 5.4 acres is located a short distance from the school. The field has excellent bleachers and ample parking area.

To combat the public facility deficiencies in the Argentine area, the city

1. U. S. Department of Commerce—Bureau of the Census, 1950 U. S. Census of Housing, Kansas City, Kansas Block Statistics, p. 2 "A dwelling unit is 'dilapidated' when it is rundown or neglected, or is of inadequate original construction, so that it does not provide adequate shelter or protection against the elements or it endangers the safety of the occupants."
Master Plan recommended several improvements in the current public works program that would relieve the flooding in the business district, traffic congestion, and overcrowded and obsolete school facilities. (See Figure 5.) The storm sewer scheduled for construction in this area to alleviate the flooding conditions, will serve approximately 75 percent of the Argentine area or 729 acres. The plans call for approximately 6500 linear feet of storm sewer of which 1500 feet will be a 10' x 10' concrete box emptying into the Kansas River just east of the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan area. The remaining 5000 feet will be a 9' x 9' box. The average depth of backfill for the sewer will be 25 feet to flow line and much of the 9' x 9' box will require extensive rock excavation. The entire project is estimated to cost in excess of two million dollars of which approximately 70 percent, or $1,659,000 will be eligible as a local grant-in-aid to defray the city's one-third share of the net cost of the ten-year urban renewal program.

The Board of Education proposes to expand the existing elementary school site adjacent to the neighborhood park to approximately two acres. A new elementary school will be constructed at an estimated cost of $385,000 and the existing school will be razed. One hundred percent of the construction and acquisition cost will qualify as a local grant-in-aid. To alleviate the acute shortage of off-street parking for the high school site, the Board of Education also proposes to acquire an adjacent area and construct off-street parking facilities which is estimated to cost $125,000 - 23 percent, or $29,000 is eligible for the city's share.

A major east-west street will be widened and improved and several jogs eliminated which will expedite the flow of traffic through the Argentine district and improve the business district traffic circulation. The total cost of the project is in the vicinity of $750,000. It may be possible to obtain 100 percent of the cost as a local grant-in-aid. The total of these non-cash credits amounts to $2,828,000.

The Neighborhood Plan

The neighborhood plan (see Figure 6) calls for major rearrangement of the street system and a more logical disposition of the basic land uses within the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan area. The reuse for the flood plain area would be predominantly for industrial and commercial purposes. Many streets and alleys would be vacated in order to combine small parcels of land into larger industrial and commercial sites. Major streets would be widened both in right-of-way and surface width to conform with recommendations of the major street plan. In many instances the neighborhood plan requires re-subdividing to provide a street system that conforms with the existing topographic conditions to obtain desirable residential sites.

Four major classifications of land uses are proposed: industrial, commercial, residential, and public and semi-public. Industrial uses would occupy a portion of the flood plain adjacent to the Atchison-Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. The area is presently occupied by substandard homes which would be cleared and the land assembled to provide adequate industrial sites. The commercial uses would largely remain in their present location in the flood plain area adjacent to the industry where they may serve as a buffer between industrial and residential uses. Substandard commercial structures would be removed, others rehabilitated, and ample off-street parking facilities
provided throughout the business district. The residential and public areas would occupy the remainder of the neighborhood and be separated from the commercial and industrial areas by a major trafficway. The existing residential area in the south portion of the neighborhood plan would require a substantial amount of clearance and redevelopment with new subdivisions replacing the obsolete platting. Paved streets and utilities would be installed throughout the replanned residential areas and approximately 700 residential lots containing lot areas of 8,000 square feet or more provided largely for single-family homes. Most of these lots would be located above the bluffs and would have attractive views of the two-mile wide Kansas River flood plain and river. Local realtors envision this location as being one of the most desirable residential areas of the city.

In most cases the numerous areas within the neighborhood occupied by good and fair housing would receive only rehabilitation treatment where necessary. In a few instances, clearance would be necessary because of the extent of substandard conditions, changes in land use or need for street rearrangements. The neighborhood plan places the extremely rough land in a proposed neighborhood park system. A network of parks has been proposed to serve the entire residential area of the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan. The design of the park area would include a system of footpaths connecting the new elementary school with all sections of the residential area. Two pedestrian overpasses would allow children to cross over the major streets. The neighborhood park area would be doubled and a new ten acre park provided for the residential area on top of the bluffs.

The neighborhood renewal plan would be divided into five urban renewal "project" areas. The estimated total gross cost of all projects is $10,920,000. The estimated net project cost, less the land disposition proceeds, is $8,472,000. The city’s one-third share is, therefore, $2,823,755. However, the non-cash local grants-in-aid mentioned above total $2,823,000, thus the cost to the city for the ten year, eleven million dollar renewal program is estimated to be as low as $755!

The survey and planning application for Project No. 1 was filed with the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan and also received approval by the federal government. A $60,000 planning advance was awarded, and at the present time (June 1959) the Urban Renewal Agency of Kansas City, Kansas is preparing plans for the execution stage of the first project.

CONCLUSION

Obviously, the Argentine General Neighborhood Renewal Plan, described above is an example of a local community moving quickly to take advantage of an expedient situation. In order for the matter to work out so well and the city to obtain federal approval of the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan before the start of construction of any project affecting the area, one contractor agreed to delay one month before receiving a work order on a one million dollar portion of the storm sewer contract.

With data available from a reasonably up-to-date comprehensive planning study it is possible to prepare the General Neighborhood Renewal Plans without too much difficulty or expense. The Kansas City, Kansas planning commission, for example, has a staff of only three persons. On the basis of this experience it would appear most advantageous for cities to prepare General
Neighborhood Renewal Plans in the detail outlined in Local Public Agency Letter No. 110 for all residential neighborhoods as a part of their usual city planning programs. These could then form the basis for both the urban renewal program and the capital expenditure program. Of course, many neighborhood plans might have to be changed and modified before being carried out by the renewal "project" process. However, the advantages of the more detailed neighborhood plans and programs more than warrant the time and money required to prepare them - irrespective of the possible financial advantages to the city occasioned by federal policies.