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FOREFRONT

THE SUBDIVIDING OF PRUITT-IGOE

A Suburban Developer Tries City-Making on
Urban Renewal's Graveyard



Story by *Tim Logan*
Photography by *Laurie Skrivan*



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Next City
1315 Walnut St.
Suite 926
Philadelphia, PA 19107

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At the corner of Jefferson and Cass avenues, two miles northwest of downtown St. Louis, 33 acres of forest sit in the middle of the city. Skinny trees sway in the wind and vegetation strains against a chain-link fence. But this is no park. There are no walking paths, no people. Aside from birds and an old electric substation, the place is abandoned.

Fifty years ago, 12,000 people lived here in 33 high-rise towers. The Capt. W. O. Pruitt Homes and William L. Igoe Apartments were supposed to be the answer to St. Louis' crushing postwar housing crisis. But in 1972, less than 20 years after it opened, the complex was shut down and blown up. Today Pruitt-Igoe, as it's widely known, stands as an iconic failure of large-scale urban renewal.

Now, four decades after Pruitt-Igoe's last residents moved away, these 33 acres of urban wilderness are at the heart of a new, even bigger plan to remake long-struggling parts of north St. Louis. A plan, really, to remake the city itself.

It's called NorthSide Regeneration, and it is a bid to redevelop about two square miles north of downtown St. Louis, to turn some of the most battered neighborhoods in all the Rust Belt into a showpiece of a 21st-century city, to create tens of thousands of jobs, blocks and blocks of new homes, schools, parks, clean energy, the works. It has already been a decade in the making. It may finally get started this fall.

NorthSide has the support of City Hall — the St. Louis Board of Aldermen approved a 1,500-acre redevelopment plan four years ago — and has been the subject of endless discussion in local civic circles. Nearly everyone has an opinion of what NorthSide should and shouldn't be. But the driving force behind it is a single man: Paul J. McKee, Jr., a suburban construction magnate-turned-developer who 10 years ago started secretly buying empty lots in the area with a vision for a real estate project big enough to alter the fortunes of his long-struggling hometown.

McKee said he's spent more than \$60 million buying land, and his NorthSide Regeneration LLC owns 2,200 parcels. He spends his days endlessly meeting everyone from bankers to preachers, potential partners to wary neighbors, pitching his project with an evangelist's zeal.

"If St. Louis is ever going to be great again," McKee likes to say, "it's going to come from the north

side."

It's the sort of vision that can be hard to see. The area McKee wants to transform today is a mishmash of urban plights. It's part post-industrial — old scrap yards and truck depots — part aging public housing, plus blocks of dwindling residential neighborhoods, where longtime homeowners live among empty lots and dilapidated vacants. Crime is high. Jobs are scarce. It's been this way for a long time.

Changing this, McKee said, will take a massive effort. While other St. Louis neighborhoods have rebounded in recent years with a mix of organic development and small-scale rehabs of historic brick homes, McKee envisions the sort of mass infusion of capital that's barely been seen in a single project in any U.S. city for decades. At a proposed \$8.1 billion over 20 years, NorthSide dwarfs even Atlantic Yards, which brought a basketball arena and a projected 6,000 new apartments to downtown Brooklyn. And at 1,500 acres, it's far bigger than Chicago's Lakeside, which hopes to turn the site of an old South Side steel mill into a new waterfront neighborhood.

NorthSide is big. But in north St. Louis, the need is huge. And the urban fabric, McKee said, is too far gone for any other approach.

"We've got to do scale," he said. "We need this area to be seen differently. We've got to change the market."

A GREENFIELD IN THE CITY

St. Louis is no stranger to grand plans. From the 1904 World's Fair to the iconic Gateway Arch to slum clearance and Pruitt-Igoe to spendy downtown stadiums, the city has long made big bets on silver bullets. It's always been the philosophy here, said Sarah Coffin, an associate professor of public policy studies at St. Louis University.

"Every time they say, 'We need a big project to turn things around,'" she said. Yet it's hard to argue this approach has worked.

For decades, people and jobs have been moving out of the city, heading to suburbs that now unfurl for 40 miles west of the Mississippi. From a peak of 850,000 people in 1950, St. Louis City's population has fallen to 319,000, a decline faster than any other major U.S. city, even Detroit. The place left behind is highly uneven.

Some neighborhoods thrive where rehabbers have fixed up old brick flats for families and young professionals. Downtown has seen a resurgence of residents and nightlife in repurposed factories and office buildings. But more than one-fifth of the city's housing stock today sits vacant, with much of it crumbling. Tens of thousands of buildings have been torn down, most replaced by empty lots that stay empty.

No part of St. Louis is more abandoned than its near north side. Despite views of the Arch and a short trip downtown, the number of people living in the six Census tracts touched by NorthSide's footprint has fallen from 56,000 in 1970 to fewer than 15,000 today. Just 9,000 people live in the project area itself. Collapsing buildings and boarded-up homes are everywhere. Even more common is grass — some stretches look like a sort of urban prairie, with just a few houses amid blocks of grass carved by little-used

streets. The crickets are loud. almost like the open fields of the exurbs, except these lots were a stone's throw from downtown. They were close to a new Mississippi River bridge on the drawing board. At their center, Pruitt-Igoe. McKee just needed to amass enough of them. He started buying.

Nine years later, McKee owns about three-quarters of the ground he wants. The biggest chunk came last year when he bought more than 1,200 parcels, including an option on the Pruitt-Igoe site, from the city's land bank for \$3.2 million. In April he won a big victory when the Missouri Supreme Court OK'd his redevelopment agreement and \$390 million tax increment financing package. That ended a lawsuit filed by a handful of residents fearing eminent domain that had blocked NorthSide for three years. Now he's lining up financing for the TIF and hopes to start street and sewer upgrades this fall.

"We're finally open for business," McKee said.

In NorthSide's "field office," an old trucking

McKee looked at a map and saw an opportunity almost like the open fields of the exurbs, except these lots were a stone's throw from downtown.

streets. The crickets are loud.

This emptiness is what drew McKee to the north side in the first place. As a developer, he specialized in luring big corporate campuses to greenfield projects, like the 52-acre MasterCard facility that employs 2,000 at a huge housing and office development he built in outer-suburban St. Charles County, and the headquarters of drug-supply giant Express Scripts at a business park near Lambert-St. Louis International Airport. City officials had hoped to lure both those companies, but they didn't have any sites big enough to offer — all that vacant land was divvied up in tiny lots among countless owners — and they kept losing projects to McKee and other suburban competitors.

"All we could show them was high rises," said Jeff Rainford, chief of staff to St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay. "They were nice and they played along, but they didn't want to be in a downtown high-rise."

McKee looked at a map and saw an opportunity

depot near where the new bridge will land next year, the walls are covered with maps and renderings what McKee wants to build, from a health clinic to blocks of new homes. He's got a slide presentation that can easily take two hours. McKee jokes that he'd like to shorten it, but he doesn't know what to leave out.

The presentation shows a neighborhood transformed. There are renderings of new office towers on what are now underused parking lots, and an empty bank-turned-bus station that becomes the archetypal hub of a lively block with coffee shops and other cute signifiers of middle-class urbanity. He's working on tenants, he said, to make these drawings a reality.

Jefferson Avenue, one of the area's main drags and today a sun-blasted, six-lane speedway, becomes a pleasant, tree-lined boulevard. There are bike paths and, if federal and local support comes through, maybe a streetcar line. McKee describes new



Today Pruitt-Igoe stands as an overgrown wilderness and an iconic failure of large-scale urban renewal.

alternative energy projects and potential partnerships with national charter school operators. He pledges that 25 percent of jobs here will go to people who live in the neighborhood, and is working with local job-training groups to help residents learn the skills they'll need. While the trainings won't guarantee jobs or that employers will hire local, at least they'll open up opportunity, something that has been in short supply for decades.

"That's what we get asked about more than anything: Jobs," McKee said. "Well, move down here, and you'll have a chance to get a job."

McKee is an excellent salesman, and his pitch is intensely personal. A gregarious bear of a man — he played offensive line at Washington University — he talks with the flat 'a's and extra 'r's that signal deep St. Louis roots. When he's talking with north siders, he usually mentions his grandfather, a driver on the old Cass Avenue streetcar line. And he almost always brings Midge, his high school sweetheart and wife of more than four decades.

He's got a lot of accomplishments to sell, too.

A civil engineer by training, McKee built one of St. Louis' biggest construction companies from scratch. Then he got into the development business, turning an old Monsanto research farm into WingHaven, a \$750 million, 2,400-home planned community with the MasterCard facility as its crown jewel. Though its progress stalled during the recession and its commercial town center has been less successful than hoped, construction is ongoing and people continue to move there. Next came NorthPark, a 550-acre business park next to the airport. It's less than half built with development moving slower than anticipated, but its prime tenant, Express Scripts, just announced plans for a sixth building at its headquarters.

McKee's got a strong track record. He also gets a lot of taxpayer help. The MasterCard deal at WingHaven benefited from state industrial revenue bonds and major road upgrades. Infrastructure work at NorthPark is paid for largely with a big TIF package, and every step of Express Scripts' expansion has received subsidies from Missouri and St. Louis County.

On NorthSide, the ask is even bigger. The project already has the biggest TIF in Missouri history — nearly \$400 million just for road and sewer work that McKee said is key to landing companies. City officials have sought several federal TIGER grants, though with no luck so far. Big tenants, particularly those that create good jobs, will likely seek incentives of their own down the road.

Then there are the Distressed Areas Land Assemblage tax credits. In 2007, even as he was still secretly buying land, McKee persuaded the Missouri legislature to create a new state tax credit program

City when he tried to get the credit program extended. Despite broadening its requirements to include an abandoned mall redevelopment in Kansas City, the Land Assemblage credits fell victim to a tight state budget and skeptical lawmakers.

“Of all the priorities we have in government, funding Paul McKee is not one of my priorities,” Brad Lager, a state senator from rural Missouri, *told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in January. “We were promised all these great things were going to be happening down there. We’ve spent millions of dollars and we’ve yet to see a shovel of turned dirt.”



The north side is dotted with decaying empty buildings, including some of those owned by Paul McKee.

just for NorthSide. The program, designed by McKee’s attorney, reimburses developers of large projects for the buying and borrowing costs of assembling large amounts of ground in poor urban neighborhoods. If that sounds rather narrowly crafted, it is. The way the law was written, NorthSide is the only development in all of Missouri that qualifies. To date it has received nearly \$45 million, a huge incentive for a land purchase that comes with no immediate promise of public return.

McKee suffered a defeat this year in Jefferson

Despite that defeat, McKee knows how to get his message heard in the halls of power. In 2007, the year those tax credits were created, McKee along with his wife, his son, his company and his attorney’s law firm donated more than \$295,000 to state and local political campaigns in Missouri, according to campaign finance records. That money went to everyone from then-Gov. Matt Blunt, a Republican, to Ward Democratic clubs that run tiny fiefdoms in St. Louis City. By donation standards, 2007 was a big year, and McKee doesn’t write quite so many checks any more. But he has

long given to key lawmakers of both parties in the state capital.

But Missouri has no limits on campaign donations and politicians get a lot of checks. It takes more than that to get the sort of support McKee enjoys in St. Louis' City Hall, where the Slay administration has backed him from the start. It's not hard to understand why. The neighborhoods McKee wants to rebuild have been written off as unfixable for decades. The simple fact that someone of McKee's stature is

predominantly black city folk who live there today.

For instance, McKee's portrayal of NorthSide as a blank canvas really bothers Sheila Rendon. The 41-year-old grew up on Mullanphy Street, a cobblestoned road one block north of Pruitt-Igoe. She lives there today with her husband and children in a little cluster of six row houses — all that's left of what was once a dense city block. But they've still got a community, she said. Neighbors look out for one another. Everyone knows everyone. And the people

"This idea that this is all vacant? Paul McKee has done his best to keep that going."

willing to make such a bet gets him a lot of credit from the start.

"It takes vision to do that," Rainford said. "The rest of us just see this mess and all the crime and racial division. Paul sees something different... He's going to have to convince builders and owners. But it's there. I can see it now."

On the streets of the north side, though, that vision is a lot less clear.

"THIS IS NOT SOME BOMBED-OUT URBAN PRAIRIE"

It's been 10 years since McKee started buying land and 4.5 years since he went public. So far, there's not much to show for it. Some buildings owned by NorthSide Regeneration LLC still look like they have been bombed, with brick thieves having stripped their outer walls and their innards spilling onto the sidewalk. The Clemens House Mansion, a once-grand home on Cass Avenue where NorthSide's official groundbreaking took place in 2009, decays by the month. In March, a NorthSide-owned building burned down, causing significant damage to two newly rehabbed neighbors. The owner of those two rehabs is suing NorthSide for negligence.

And while McKee has said repeatedly that he wants the area's 9,000 existing residents to stay put, there is a strong sense — at least among some — that this rich, white, suburban developer's vision for this neighborhood doesn't include the working-class,

who wanted to leave did so a long time ago.

"This is not some bombed-out urban prairie," she said. "People live here. Children play here. This idea that this is all vacant? Paul McKee has done his best to keep that going."

Rendon has heard McKee's promises not to use eminent domain on homeowners and his oft-repeated statement that he wants every current resident to stay. But she looks at the vacant lots NorthSide owns on either side of her house, as well as across the street and behind, and she can't help but feel a little surrounded.

"If you're not going to use all this," she said, "why would you need it?"

Rendon is part of a loose group of neighborhood activists who have been pushing for more community involvement in the NorthSide plan. They seek an advisory board or even a formal community benefits agreement like those incorporated to varying degrees of success into other large projects, including Atlantic Yards. McKee has proposed a sort of massive homeowners association for the area, but Rendon and co. are wary of an organization they'd have to pay to join, and are hoping city aldermen will legislate a community board and more financial help for homeowners to participate in the project.

Ask these people what they want, and their answers sound a lot like what McKee is promising — jobs, decent housing, a grocery store, functional streetlights. But they don't feel like their voices are getting heard in this process.

“I’m with him on the quality of jobs, I really am,” said Kyona Robinson, whose mother lived in Pruitt-Igoe and who herself now lives in the neighborhood. “But my concern is that no one is really listening to the needs of people in the community. He’s talking about building a Family Dollar. It’s insulting.” (NorthSide recently received a building permit for a Family Dollar store, which would be its first new construction.)

Sal Martinez gets the skepticism. He has spent 10 years running a community development agency in north St. Louis and knows that much of the area has seen nothing but decline. There are lots of people around who lost homes in 1950s slum clearance, who lived through the rise and fall of Pruitt-Igoe, and who have heard a string of big plans that fizzled.

“You have a community here that has experienced decades of white flight and disinvestment,” he said. “It has created the perfect environment for distrust.”

But Martinez supports McKee. He’s working with NorthSide on a program to train neighborhood residents for jobs and sees the developer as the best chance to bring good employers back to north St. Louis.

“The blight was big,” Martinez said. “Plans to redevelop it have to be big, too.” And he is far from the only person who feels that way.

Karen Simmons first talked to McKee seven years ago, when she picked up the phone and called the man she’d heard was buying up land all over her neighborhood. McKee met Simmons and a couple of her friends for dinner, explained what he was doing, and asked them for their help.

“I love Paul,” she said. “He’s very open.”

Simmons wound up working for NorthSide for some time on a newsletter, and she still talks with McKee now and then. She loves the size of his vision, because it begins to match the size of the problem.

“Just in my lifetime the city’s population has gone from 700,000 to 300,000,” she said. “St. Louis City is flatlining. We need this.”

But she worries, too, that McKee’s not reaching people the way he should. Simmons is a professional communicator who used work for AT&T and now does financial literacy training. One thing her career has taught her is that you need to listen just as much as you talk.



McKee’s portrayal of NorthSide as a blank canvas upsets Sheila Rendon, a longtime homeowner in the neighborhood.

“Communications is two-way,” she said. “You send and you receive.”

McKee would argue that he has received a lot. He’s held 140 community meetings over the last few years, he said, mainly in church basements and living rooms with 15 or 20 people. Most were invitation-only, closed to the press and other outsiders. The small groups and quiet settings gave people a chance to really talk and, McKee said, and for him to really listen. And as the project sat in legal limbo for three years, there wasn’t much else to do, anyway.

“It’s the best thing that happened to this project,” he said. “We had to go out and meet people. I didn’t have anything else to do, and we’ve found some incredible people.”

But McKee clearly has a lot more communicating to do.

At 8am on a hot Wednesday in August, a line of people curled up the street outside the downtown office building that houses the St. Louis Development Corp. Many held a letter that SLDC had sent all property owners in the NorthSide footprint, notifying them of a public hearing this morning.

The hearing was on some relatively minor tweaks to the TIF, changing dates and technical updates to account for the three years lost to the lawsuit. But for many residents it was their first chance in years to see McKee in the flesh, to hear his plan and to

that NorthSide leased to an urban farming group. One night this summer insecticide sprayers came through, she said, and now the blocks are eye-high with rows of corn.

“We weren’t asked. No one told us,” Cooks said. “I’m a city girl. I chose to live here. If I wanted to live in the middle of a cornfield I’d have moved out to the country.”

“We weren’t asked” was a common theme. Resident after resident said they wanted better things, but that they wanted to be part of the process, and to



McKee said he’s spent more than \$60 million buying land. His NorthSide Regeneration LLC owns 2,200 parcels.

question it.

At least 200 came, crowding through the doorway of the hearing room. And after McKee made his presentation and the city’s bond counsel walked through the financials of the TIF plan, a couple dozen residents took to the microphone, most to make it clear they still don’t trust McKee or his plan for their neighborhood.

“I’m all for progress, but all I’m seeing is further decline of what’s already here,” said Joyce Cooks, who lives in an area of mostly empty blocks

be able to be part of the place when it’s done.

“All the plans never say anything about the people who live in this neighborhood,” said Calvin Jones, pastor of a Baptist church in the NorthSide area. “They need to know what’s going on and be a part of the plan. If you want to plan, include us in the plan.”

Through the whole comment period, McKee stood there, a bit behind the microphone. Occasionally he’d grimace or shake his head as speaker after speaker blasted him, but mostly he listened. After the meeting



Homeowners in the NorthSide footprint fear the city will use eminent domain to clear the area for McKee's project.

McKee stood against a wall outside facing a scrum of reporters and said he was still confident all those small meetings had built real public support.

"The community is made up over 9,000 people," he *told the Post-Dispatch*. "We meet with them regularly. The silent majority doesn't come to these meetings."

Two weeks later, the TIF board voted to recommend the changes up to the Board of Aldermen, which will likely vote on the matter — and perhaps tackle bigger questions of community input — before the end of the year. But no matter how they vote or how much public support McKee really has, there's a big question hanging over NorthSide that no one can answer just yet: How is he going to pull this off?

"SO MANY PIECES THAT NEED TO FALL INTO PLACE"

For all the political pull, taxpayer subsidy and land McKee has, what he doesn't have is any actual projects lined up, at least none that he'll talk about publicly. Aside from one community bank that has been lending him money to buy land, and a handful of homebuilders who've signed on for a small housing pilot project, he doesn't have any private-sector partners, either. It's not hard to understand why this may be a tough sell — McKee's model of large-scale corporate development has a better track record in suburban areas devoid of associations with poverty and free from suspicious homeowners. Will the partners needed to get NorthSide done go in for greenfield-style project dropped down in the middle of the city?

They will, McKee said, but it will be gradual. He's working every day to bring in tenants, talking with big corporate office users and small community health centers. But first he needs to get the streets and sewers in better shape. To pay for that, he needs to start selling his TIF bonds. And for that, he needs to push those tweaks to the TIF through the Board of Aldermen, despite all those doubters who showed up for the hearing.

This has been a theme all along for NorthSide. Before McKee can do X, he's got to pin down Y. There are many moving parts. The trouble, Coffin said, isn't necessarily size. It's the sheer complexity of the thing.

"There's something to be said for [McKee's] approach, assuming all the pieces that go along with it," she said. "But with this project there are just so many ifs. There are so many pieces that need to fall into place."

McKee said he's focused on one piece — jobs — that will make all the rest easier. Attracting employers to NorthSide is his number-one priority. It's what sets his project apart, he said, from all the other failed efforts to revive north St. Louis, which built housing but did little to change economic conditions for the people who live there. That NorthSide will bring jobs, McKee is adamant.

"This is not a housing project," he said. "To me, houses are a therefore. They're not a driver. You've got to do the jobs piece. That's why you need scale."

So far, big employers haven't exactly been

lining up. NorthSide has attracted only one company, a pipe supplier that moved 48 jobs across town last year. Another firm, which washes linens for local hospitals, bought and refitted an empty factory near Pruitt-Igoe without McKee's help in 2011. The developer is hopeful that the jobs will start to flow soon, now that the lawsuit is behind him and street work is about to start. That new bridge will open next year. The economy is perking up. His phone, he said, is starting to ring more often.

McKee told the city TIF board in September that he's hearing a lot of interest from retailers, though he can't name names yet, and that he has two industrial users — with about 250 jobs between them — ready to break ground next year. Further out, he said, there are even bigger fish on the line.

"We're hearing from people who have real opportunities," he said. "We're recruiting corporate headquarters. We're recruiting energy partners. We're recruiting a 5,000-job user."

"Residents here don't have time to wait for his 20-year vision to become reality. What we're pushing for here could be achieved in five."

"A 5,000-job user," it's worth noting, would instantly become the fifth-largest private employer in the City of St. Louis. That's more people than work at Anheuser-Busch InBev or the headquarters of pet food giant Nestle Purina. It would be a huge win, but it's the kind of thing that doesn't come along very often, especially in a region that has regained only one-third of the jobs it lost in the recession. But McKee points to MasterCard and Express Scripts. Why not in north St. Louis?

"We've done it before," he said. "I'm confident we can pull it off."

If all goes according to plan, he'll eventually have some help. Richard Ward, a veteran real estate consultant in St. Louis, said that McKee's role in NorthSide will likely be that of an "umbrella developer" who assembles the land, sets the infrastructure and creates the conditions for other companies to come in and actually build. Back in the urban renewal

days, Ward said, the government acted as a sort of catalyst for development. Now it's on private parties like McKee.

"You've got to assemble sites and make them available if you want to attract companies," he said. "And the site users aren't going to put up with five years of squabbling. He's got to do that part."

When it's through, Ward predicts, and if the economy holds up, companies will come, especially around the foot of that new bridge and in spots close to downtown. It will just take some time. "It's not going to happen all at once," he said.

In that sense, NorthSide may wind up like other St. Louis success stories of recent years, those that were built gradually. The city has a burgeoning start-up scene and some residential neighborhoods have revived almost house by house, with rehabbers sprucing up the city's trademark red brick housing stock, and young families and small businesses following in behind.

That has happened mostly on the city's more intact and better-off south side, but it is also taking place in the shadow of McKee's project, in Old North St. Louis.

The neighborhood sits across a six-lane street from NorthSide. Its old brick homes and postcard views of the Arch have drawn rehabbers for about a decade. The area's population grew 28 percent in the 2000s, a rare feat among north side neighborhoods, and the number of vacant buildings fell nearly by half.

Some of that is the work of Old North St. Louis Restoration Group, a community development corporation that built 20 new homes and 32 rehabbed apartment units between 2005 and 2007. By 2010 it finished the \$37 million conversion of a mostly abandoned pedestrian mall into two blocks of bright, glassy storefronts on the street level and 78 affordable apartments above. It's almost fully leased, according to executive director Sean Thomas.

The process has taken a while, he said, but it was driven by the neighborhood. And the slow pace gave longtime residents time to adapt to the newcomers. Now the same kind of mixed-income, mixed-use neighborhood McKee wants to build is in fact getting built right next door, just in a very different way.

“There’s plenty more work to be done,” Thomas said. “But residents here don’t have time to wait for his 20-year vision to become reality. What we’re pushing for here could be achieved in five.”

Of course, maybe 30 or 40 people actually work on 14th Street. It is not transforming the city’s economy. What McKee’s trying to do is on a much larger scale. It has to be big, Rainford said, to change the way people see north St. Louis.

“He’s going to have to offer something different

just to get people interested,” he said. “Really, Paul McKee is swimming against 50 or 60 years of history that has played out on television.”

What exactly that looks like, Rainford said, it’s too soon to know. Much will depend on the market and what companies might want to move in. McKee agrees. He’s out there hunting big fish every day, he said, but he knows they’re rare, and reeling one in can take years. He’s selling a big vision, but he knows it will happen block by block, piece by piece, with 15 houses here and a community health center there. That’s the only way to win over the doubters and quiet his critics. That’s the only way to make anyone believe.

“We’re going to have to show something,” he said. “People are going to have to see something happen.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Logan writes about the economy and urban development for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, where he has covered NorthSide Regeneration for four years. He has also worked for newspapers in New York and Indiana, earned a masters degree in urban affairs from St. Louis University, and won national journalism awards, including a Loeb Award for Business Journalism in 2011. He lives with his wife and young son in the City of St. Louis.



ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Laurie Skrivan is a staff photographer at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Her work has been recognized by the Pictures of the Year International and the National Press Photographers Association's Best of Photojournalism competition.