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Vibrant Master Plan Unveiled for Historic Florence

- Florence Futures Organization Focuses on Neighborhood Revitalization
and Economic Development

OMAHA, Neb., September 19, 2007 -- A bold master plan aimed at rejuvenating Omaha's historic Florence area was unveiled today by Florence Futures at the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, the evolution of a vision born at a town hall meeting almost two years ago.

"This plan celebrates our rich heritage while renewing us for a brilliant future," said Linda Meigs, chairperson of Florence Futures. "With this plan, Florence is poised to become a historic entrance to the city of Omaha and a link to regional tourism."

The \$25 million plan outlines several downtown redevelopment and streetscape recommendations and lays out a blueprint for a new gateway park, an attraction that would feature a celebration fountain, historic village and winter quarters garden. It also calls for the establishment of a neighborhood revitalization area from State Street to Craig Avenue.

"We've done a lot of urban planning like this, and every time this happens, people are renewed. There is a sense of pride, a sense of worth," said Dave Ciaccio of BCDM, a full-service architectural firm based in Omaha.

BCDM crafted the plan along with urban planners from Olsson Associates. The master plan incorporates input from more than a dozen organizations and entities including Florence Futures, Omaha by Design, the Omaha City Planning Department and the Chamber.

"When a plan is in place, it sends a signal to the broader community and to the region that new things are beginning to happen, and, as a result, private investors begin to seek new opportunities," said Ciaccio. "This whole process is about building new community spirit, new energy in the community and attracting private investment."

Omaha City Councilman Jim Suttle represents the Florence area and believes the vision can be made real. "If you can dream it, you can do it. That's what we're doing to this city. We can dream a convention center, and we did it. We can dream landing the Olympic swimming trials, and we did it. It's a matter of capturing the dream and then settling down on how you implement it."

Suttle, who Ciaccio described as a "great spirit behind the project," said he is already working on that next step.

"We are started. I've already engaged the Mormon church in discussions. We have two hotel groups that are now stepping forward with interest. There are some other commercial interests that are actively looking at locations in downtown Florence," said Suttle.

While revitalizing the downtown commercial district is a key part of the master plan, it also focuses on capitalizing on the 60-80,000 tourists who visit the Mormon Trail Center and the Mormon Pioneer Cemetery each year. Paul Bogard, President of the Florence Historical Foundation, said, right now, those tourists are by-passing Florence because it doesn't have the facilities to feed, entertain or accommodate them.

"We have the potential of taking care of these many thousands of people who come to us without any push, but we're not captivating them," said Bogard. "We want to beautify our area and make it stellar and desirable for that tourist dollar."

The master plan explains how Florence can position itself as a hub for regional tourism and details how the Florence Mill can be adapted into a virtual visitor center.

The Florence community raised the \$180,000 to pay for the master plan, making it Omaha's only master plan paid for without city funds.

"I just think that says a lot about this area," said Mele Mason, a member of the Florence Futures board. "We have a lot of pride in Florence and we want to show it."

Councilman Suttle said he has spoken with Omaha's mayor and planning director about adopting the Florence master plan into the city's comprehensive master plan. Suttle hopes to have public hearings before the planning board and the city council before the end of the year.

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The mission of the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce is to increase business, investment and employment in the Greater Omaha area.

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