

# La Vista: Sales tax rate would be metro area's highest

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edge. If successful, La Vista would take a page from the Midtown Crossing and Aksarben Village projects that have been built within established parts of Omaha.

Called Vision 84, La Vista's plan calls for transforming the Brentwood Crossing shopping center and golf course into a commercial and residential center and large civic park.

If the increased sales tax passes, the Sarpy County city would collect an extra \$1.1 million per year, according to city projections. The increase would put La Vista's local sales tax at 2 percent on top of the state's 5.5 percent, making it the highest rate in the metro area.

Residents have been sent city-generated brochures about the proposal, and a campaign committee is making plans to deliver postcards and go door-to-door.

Still, some residents aren't enthusiastic.

Two La Vista City Council members are facing election challenges from opponents who say citizens shouldn't go along with a plan that doesn't specify how the redevelopment money would be used. The challengers are skeptical about raising taxes to jump-start the project.

Kindig is asking residents to trust the city, calling city involvement in past projects such as the Southport area an investment, not a giveaway. Plus, he said, the city has explored other options with no luck.

"This is our only funding source," he said. "We don't have a pot of money that we'll be able to tap into. This is the funding source to move 84th Street forward."

The decline of La Vista's main drag started in 2006, when Walmart left its anchor position for neighboring Papillion. Other stores followed, including Hobby Lobby, which last year also moved to Papillion.

La Vista's development pushed farther west to its Southport area located off

Interstate 80 near 126th Street and Giles Road. The same year it lost Walmart, it landed Cabela's there.

The area also has an Embassy Suites, the La Vista Conference Center and a Courtyard by Marriott.

Larry Skarnulis, owner of Computer Habit in the 84th Street corridor, said he's unsure if the increased sales tax would be enough to bring life back to the area, because foot and vehicle traffic have already shifted to Papillion.

"I think anyone would say they want to see improvement in the community," he said, "but the big question is if people are willing to pay for it."

Allowing cities to levy up to a 2-cent local sales tax was controversial when it passed. In 2012, lawmakers in Lincoln overrode Gov. Dave Heineman's veto of Legislative Bill 357, which granted cities the authority to increase their local sales tax the extra half-cent with voter approval.

Voters in smaller towns — Sidney, Alma and Waterloo — have approved the increase. Voters in Bellevue and Nebraska City have rejected it.

The law states that cities La Vista's size can use the money for public infrastructure projects or voter-approved infrastructure related to an economic development program.

Kindig said he would like to use the money to first address the former Walmart and Hobby Lobby properties. But ultimately the decision is up to the City Council, and the options remain open.

La Vista City Administrator Brenda Gunn said the city needs to know if it will bring the sales tax revenue to the table before deciding its first move.

The list of spending options include acquiring and demolishing property, converting the golf course into the Civic Center Park and improving existing infrastructure. The city also has talked about using the funding to finance a bond issue,

allowing La Vista to do more at once.

"What happens in May will dictate what direction we go," Gunn said.

City Council candidates Troy White and Mark White, who aren't related, said the uncertainty is frustrating.

"They'll figure it out as they go along — but they want the money first. I don't like that at all," said Mark White, noting that he opposes raising the sales tax.

Troy White said he's concerned that the \$11 million generated by the sales tax revenue over its 10-year life won't make a dent in the project's overall price tag, which is still unknown. He also wants voters to realize that the sales tax increase could be extended past 10 years if the council decided to use it to pay off bonds.

The city has projected that the park alone will cost about \$42 million but hasn't estimated the full project's cost.

Gunn said she expects partnerships to come together and share the cost if the project has momentum from the additional sales tax. As it sits, she said, developers aren't interested.

"They all want to see the city has some skin in the game, too," she said.

Walt Peffer of P.J. Morgan Real Estate agreed, saying the area has sat long enough for an interested developer to step forward. He said city involvement could make the project more feasible for a developer.

"It's a pretty good-sized undertaking," said Peffer, who has worked on Ralston's redevelopment plan but hasn't been involved in La Vista's. "You'd have to have a developer who's willing to spend an awful lot of money to convert the space."

Mark White called Vision 84 a "very expensive and ambitious" plan and said he believes it should be scaled back to focus on the Walmart property without forcing it through eminent domain.

The property is owned by E. Stanley Kroenke, a billion-

aire real estate developer married to a Walmart heiress. Currently, the space is being leased to smaller businesses.

La Vista spokesman Mitch Beaumont said the city has been in communication with Columbia, Mo.-based Kroenke Group's representatives and they are aware of the city's redevelopment vision.

Though the City Council passed a resolution last year asserting its right to seize the property through eminent domain, officials have called that a last resort.

The city has also sent letters to property owners in the shopping district expressing interest in acquiring the properties.

"I think all this needs to stay in private hands," Mark White said. "I don't want the government to get any bigger or have any more money. This sales tax will pull money out of the local economy and make business less attractive in La Vista." Kindig disagreed, saying he's not convinced that adding a half-cent to the sales tax will spur businesses to leave town. The increase would add an additional 10 cents to a \$20 transaction.

Raising the sales tax would have little effect on locals, Kindig said, because the majority of the city's sales tax revenue comes from nonresidents staying in La Vista's hotels and shopping at Cabela's.

He said people constantly talk with him about the need for some kind of change to the corridor, and he pointed to a survey of 400 residents last year in which a majority said they supported raising the sales tax to help it along.

"The half-cent sales tax is going to allow us to meet the priorities set by the citizens and the council and myself, which is the redevelopment of 84th Street," he said.

"This is the catalyst that we need to meet what the citizens have asked for."

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# Land bank: City would get an asset to sell, instead of just demolition bill

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leaders of nonprofit groups, are working to create the Omaha Municipal Land Bank. The new public organization would be run by a volunteer board, with the aim of buying up vacant properties and dilapidated homes and transforming them into something useful.

Council President Pete Festersen said it's a logical next step for the city, which in recent years has stepped up its efforts to tear down condemned properties. In 2013, city officials more than doubled the amount of demolition funding, setting aside \$850,000. This year, the budget provides \$957,000 for demolitions.

But those efforts have barely scratched the surface of the problem, Festersen said. The demolition list has continued to grow.

Plus, tearing down a house is only a first step. While the city might be able to fund demolition, it doesn't have the additional money set aside to ensure that something new goes up. And it rarely recoups any of the demolition expenses from the property owner.

"When we do a demolition order on a vacant or condemned property and the owner doesn't respond, the city comes in and does the demolition," Festersen said. "Then a lien is placed on the property for demolition costs, but we almost never recover those costs."

If a land bank took over the property, however, it would gain an asset that it could later sell — bringing in money for more demolitions and property transformations.

Omaha's land bank would be the first in the state, but the same model has been used in communities across the country.

If the idea is approved, the mayor and the council will appoint members to the organization's volunteer board.

Mayor Jean Stothert, who supports the idea, said the land bank could help with rehabilitation projects across the city, from north Omaha and South Omaha to Millard.

She said the selection of the board members would be an important process.

"The land bank law requires a specific makeup of the board, with members from each City Council district with specific background and expertise," she said. "This board structure is essential to the success of the land bank."

The city would help fund financing, which would likely come from private groups and public sources. Among the options: setting aside a portion of property taxes from land bank properties, along with proceeds from the sale of those properties and from redeeming tax certificates.

The city also could provide more direct funding.

Omaha's land bank would target properties that pose particular problems, such as safety hazards or places used to house criminal activity. The land bank would sort out a property's history and ownership and, if it met certain criteria, look to acquire it from willing sellers. The organization would pick up properties by donations, transfers from banks or the sale of tax liens, which would eventually cause properties to go into foreclosure.

Amanda Brewer, executive director of Habitat for Humanity of Omaha, said a land bank's oversight of those transfers could help stop the problem of properties being left in legal limbo for years.

Habitat for Humanity supported the bill in the Legislature and has been involved in planning with Omaha city officials. Brewer said her organization's backing of the idea in part stems from seeing so many properties sit vacant because of absentee landlords.

She said she frequently hears about properties that were bought up by out-of-state investors looking to make money — not to deal with a troubled property. Brewer pointed to one north Omaha property that has been in limbo for 14 years.

"There's tons of that activity," she said. "We just heard about one yesterday. Habitat homeowners said the house across the street has been abandoned for 10 years, and people have been squatting in it for 10 years."

Brewer said she likes the idea that a land trust could acquire multiple properties that could then be transformed into a new development.

Organizers have been sharing their plans with neighborhood leaders.

Sharon Olson, a member of the Minne-Lusa/Miller Park Neighborhood Association, said she has also been frustrated with absentee property owners. She's not sure if a land bank would provide a complete solution and hopes the city will consider strengthening its reach over people who don't take care of the homes and buildings they own.

Olson said she knows of properties where neighbors have been able to track down owners — and those owners have refused to make any improvements.

"People need to be held accountable for walking away from their property," she said. "They're living right here, and we can't do anything about it."

Gray said it's clear that the city's current resources for dealing with the problem aren't enough. "We're not going to be able to demolish our way out of this," he said.

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# Dads: Payoff is seen in test scores, fewer missed days

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"It's a shame the way people operate," said Shundale Bynum, one of the Miller Park dads. "They say 'Oh, you take care of your kids?' Yeah, I'm a father. That's what we do."

Several findings of a report released in December by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention counter the myth of the deadbeat black dad, finding that African-American fathers reported participating in daily activities such as reading, diapering and dressing their children as often as fathers of other races — whether they lived with their kids full time or not.

Still, in Omaha, census figures show that a growing number of children are being raised in single-parent — namely, single-mother — households.

For years, community activists have called on fathers, especially black fathers, to take a more involved role in their kids' lives.

The stakes are high. Households subsisting on one income are more likely to live in poverty. That, in turn, increases the likelihood of a host of long-term consequences for kids: low grades, teen pregnancy, high dropout rates, behavioral problems.

One Princeton University researcher found that even when variables such as income, parent education and race were factored in, boys who grew up without fathers were still more likely to end up in prison.

The fathers and grandfathers of Miller Park, located at 28th and Ellison Avenues, know too well the stumbling blocks that exist for kids raised without a father or positive male role model.

One Miller Park father, Anthony McDougald, acted up and got kicked out of Benson High when his dad died. So he and other fathers and grandfathers have stepped up to the plate.

"There's some children whose fathers are not involved, but there's a grandfather out there, like me," said Lacey Smith. "I've been bringing my grandson to school ever since he started. He's never been late, he's fed, he's clean, he does great in school."

These men have vowed to do better by their kids and to show other young men what it means to be not just a dad, but a positive influence in their north Omaha neighborhoods.

"I want more for my grandchild, more for our children," Smith said.

"More for our community," Michael DuBose added.

On a gray, chilly morning last week, several dads walked their



KENT SIEVERS/THE WORLD-HERALD

Michael DuBose, right, helps Lavaeh Stephens with her reading by quizzing her on a set of practice words. Lavaeh and DuBose's son are in the same kindergarten class at Miller Park Elementary School.

kids into school and sat down to eat breakfast with them, patiently opening bottles of milk and cartons of orange juice for their kids' classmates, too.

McDougald soothed his 4-year-old daughter, Gabriella, and helped her grab a breakfast tray. DuBose quizzed his son's kindergarten classmate Lavaeh Stephens from a list of practice words she pulled out of a red folder.

He'd point to a word and she would sound it out, earning a "Yes, ma'am" from DuBose every time she got a word right.

John Reed Jr. drops by his son's preschool classroom several times a week just to check in. Tyrone Toney picks up his son every day and reminds him to watch his "firecracker" temper. DuBose coaches several sports teams, as does Terrance Belvin.

"There's a negative perception in our society, particularly in urban settings, that parents do not care or parents aren't involved," Utterback said. "It's really the job of the school to create an atmosphere where they feel welcome, where they're expected to be involved, where their input is valued."

Parents credit the climate created at Miller Park by teachers and administrators, such as Utterback, who expect high levels of parent participation, while also making families feel comfortable.

Belvin recalled when his son Terrance's class was going to an Omaha Storm Chasers game.

"I remember I always wanted to take my son to his first baseball game," he said. "I asked Ms. Utterback if it's all right if I go ... and she allowed me to."

It's a two-way street. Teachers need help, too, whether it's

an extra set of eyes and ears on a field trip or a parent who devotes extra time to reading on weekends.

"Parental involvement encompasses a plethora of activities," Utterback said. "It doesn't have to mean you're coming up and running a bake sale. You can drop in once a week and visit your child in the classroom to check on reading. Sit down for 30 minutes every night and review their academic binder to make sure their assignments are complete."

That focus on parent engagement is paying off, in higher test scores, better behavior and lower absenteeism.

Over the past five years the school has touted a perfect attendance rate for parent-teacher conferences. Teachers meet parents at their jobs if they can't make it to the school. They'll offer them rides home if they don't have cars.

The school received a special shout-out in the Omaha Public Schools' recent needs assessment, whose authors noted that because of the school's high-quality staff and detailed classroom instruction, Miller Park should be considered a model for Omaha schools.

Though the school is one of OPS's highest-poverty elementary schools — nearly 95 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunches — the number of students scoring at or above proficient on state reading and math tests has jumped 30 and 20 percent, respectively, over the past three years.

"I have a school that's right down the street from my house," DuBose said, "but I bring my kids here because I can't get away from this, from the foundation they have here.

It's so stable. I've never been part of anything like this."

In its strategic plan, OPS has identified a need to strengthen its relationships with parents and recently posted a job for a new community, schools and family engagement coordinator.

Surveys and focus groups assembled last fall found that parents felt shut out of their local schools, while teachers and principals admitted to often feeling ill-equipped to handle the host of social problems prevalent in some of Omaha's low-income neighborhoods.

Other schools have tried to focus on dads, holding father-specific events — the PTA at Adams Elementary hosted its annual Doughnuts with Dads breakfast last week — and working to convince men that the PTA isn't just the domain of moms.

Larry Davenport has been president of the Boyd Elementary PTA for seven years. He prides himself on creating an open atmosphere and recruiting dads for volunteer work.

"At the kindergarten round-up every year I speak to all the new parents and really encourage them that this isn't your typical PTA," he said. "This is a family PTA, and we need the dads, too."

At Miller Park, Utterback does out credit to her staff and the parents — moms as well as dads — who meet them halfway.

"We've just created an atmosphere with the expectation that we need you (the parents)," she said. "Your presence and your voice needs to be heard at the table, and we need to work together, side by side."

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## LOTTERIES

### POWERBALL

**Saturday, March 29:** 2-3-12-27-38. **Powerball:** 17. **Power Play:** 2. No jackpot winner. **Jackpot for Wednesday, April 2:** \$60 million

### MEGA MILLIONS

**Friday, March 28:** 2-3-9-50-73. **Megaball:** 12. **Megaplier:** 3. No jackpot winner. **Jackpot for Tuesday, April 1:** \$20 million

### NEBRASKA

**Pick 5 — Saturday, March 29:** 12-13-24-25-27. No jackpot winner. **Jackpot for Monday, March 31:** \$90,000

**MyDaY — Saturday, March 29:** 11-26-09 **2by2 — Sunday, March 30:** red 19-21; white 21-23

**Pick 3 — Saturday, March 29:** 3-6-1

### IOWA

**All or Nothing — Sunday, March 30:** midday 1-2-3-4-5-10-14-15-16-19-23-24; evening 2-3-4-12-15-16-17-18-19-20-22-24

**Hot Lotto — Saturday, March 29:** 2-16-17-23-46. **Hot Ball:** 4

**Pick 3 — Sunday, March 30:** midday 5-5-6; evening 0-8-3

**Pick 4 — Sunday, March 30:** midday 7-6-6-6; evening 7-0-2-9

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