

2002 PUBLIC OFFICIALS OF THE YEAR

Pulling Together: Strong Partnerships Spur Urban Revitalization

Carol Marinovich

City Council Member, Kansas City, Missouri

One of the first things Carol Marinovich did after her election to the city council in Kansas City, Kansas, was to go after a strip club in town. Convinced it was a drag on an already troubled neighborhood, she got it shut down. Then she kept pushing, working with a reform-minded district attorney to pass an ordinance constricting the city's once freewheeling attitude toward adult entertainment clubs. Fairly quickly, KCK — as it is known — began losing its reputation as the region's magnet for sordidness.

That was more than a decade ago, but Marinovich still understands that lots of small threads go into creating the fabric of a city, and that they have to be addressed one by one. She became mayor in 1995, and though KCK continues to struggle, it is a different place than when she took over.

Kansas City, Kansas, has always been more roughhewn than its better-known counterpart in Missouri. Long a factory town, it remains one even in an era when cities with industrial pasts are desperate to reinvent themselves; it counts among its employers a large General Motors plant, Sunshine Biscuits, meatpackers, Owens-Corning and other mainstays of heavy industry. But it has also suffered, as other older manufacturing cities have, with the flight of both people and businesses from downtown, and a dramatic drop in its population through the 1970s and '80s. When a hotel opened its doors downtown a few months ago, it was the first to do so in more than three decades.

That hotel is just one of the city's improving vital signs. Perhaps the most obvious is its government, which in 1997, with Marinovich leading the way, consolidated with surrounding Wyandotte County. While the move helped the combined governments cut their workforce and trim property taxes four years running, it also had a less tangible but no less crucial impact: The periodic scandals that had beset both county and city government came to an end, and KCK's relationship with state government in Topeka improved dramatically. That, in turn, Rob Gurwitt. " Pulling Together: Strong Partnerships Spur Urban Revitalization Carol Marinovich" Governing: The States and Localities. 2002. 27 June 2012 <<http://www.governing.com/poy/Carol-Marinovich.html>>

helped it win perhaps the biggest boost to its economy in a generation: the immense Kansas Speedway, which now anchors a state “tourism district” and budding retail center. No less important, the city seems to be stemming its population loss; while residents had been leaving at a rate of well over 1,000 per year through the early 1990s, KCK’s population in 2000 was virtually the same as it had been in 1992. Downtown, too, is looking up. In addition to recently built or renovated government buildings and a science and technology center, the neighborhoods that surround the city’s center have begun seeing new life. A town-home development in one neighborhood — the first new multi-family housing developed in the downtown area in 30 years — filled up in 30 days.

Much of this improvement stems from Marinovich’s skill at finding allies and swaying them to her cause. “She’s very shy, very nice, very dedicated to her family,” says Cindy Cash, president and CEO of the local Chamber of Commerce. “But she’s truly been the leader in this whole development. You have to remember she was a schoolteacher before she got into politics, and boy howdy, when she has to she can put that schoolmarm voice on.”

In particular, Marinovich has been driven by a core belief that even with the greater resources consolidation has brought, local government can succeed only by working closely with others. “With the Speedway, we had to work with the state of Kansas and the private components,” she says. “Downtown, a unified government or neighborhood organization or CDC cannot do it alone. You have to work on forging strong partnerships.” This is especially true in neighborhoods, she argues; during her tenure, the unified government has helped boost the number of neighborhood organizations from 30 to over 100. “Say there’s a two-block area with a lot of issues. We as the government could go in and correct them, but if you don’t have an intact neighborhood group there, a couple of months later you couldn’t even tell we’d been there. I see neighborhood groups as the mainstay to the longevity of positive change.”

— **Rob Gurwitt** *Photos by Dan White*