

In attempt to revamp property on Troost, Overland Park councilman Farassati experiences other side of development criticism

ROXIE HAMMILL - DECEMBER 6, 2019 9:00 AM



Overland Park Councilman Faris Farassati bought the property on Troost with plans to build a mixed-use project with office space and apartments. Some residents in the area have pushed back on early

Overland Park Councilmember Faris Farassati, [who announced this week he is considering running for Overland Park mayor in 2021](#), has often been at odds with the developers who come asking for tax incentives. It happened just Monday night, in fact, [in a lengthy exchange with lawyer John Petersen about the Brookridge project](#). That conversation ended with a not-quite-convincing, “Thank you councilman. Always enjoy talking to you,” from Petersen.

But across the state line, Farassati is beginning to get an idea of what it’s like to be on the receiving end of some of that skepticism. In Kansas City, Mo., cancer doctor Farassati himself is a developer – though on a much smaller scale than Brookridge. Farassati has a project that he says will help revitalized a troubled stretch of Troost Avenue.

So far it has not been completely smooth sailing.

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Farassati’s KC Outlook project on the 4500 block of Troost envisions 50,000 square feet with a mixed use of commercial and apartments. It’s two five-story buildings, 19,000 square feet of commercial, 108 units of one- or two-bedroom

apartments and efficiencies – a \$20 million project in all.

But Farassati has run into trouble with the South Hyde Park neighborhood that directly abuts the development to the west. They've submitted an objection letter to the city, signed by 14 residents at addresses that make up the majority of the property in the 4500 block of Gillham Road.

Meanwhile his political opponents have pointed out that he plans to eventually ask for a tax incentive. Farassati has been one of the most vocal skeptics of tax incentive plans that come before the Overland Park council. Mentions of the development and tax incentives popped up with regularity on his campaign sites during the recent city election campaign, he said.



Farassati says the blighted property on Troost presents a different case for tax incentives than many projects in Overland Park planned for thriving areas.

But he says he has no problem answering the tax incentive question.

KC Outlook is planned for a down-at-the-heels section of Troost dominated by a long, gunmetal blue boarded-up building and something that looks like it could have been a car wash once. At the southern end is a charred, gutted hole where one of the vacant buildings recently burned down. In the middle of the block is a former fire station that is not a part of the development.

"It just doesn't get more blighted than this," Farassati said of the parcel he says he bought for \$110,000.

He doesn't dispute that he will have to ask for some form of public financing. As a small developer, he said he'll need those funds to make the project work. But that's consistent with his position that tax increment financing and the like should serve its original purpose of boosting development in blighted areas where private money doesn't want to go. In fact, he voted for [Overland Park's Metcalf Crossing project, which resulted in demolition of two derelict hotels](#), for that reason, he said.

Although Farassati doesn't see himself as a savior of the Troost Corridor, he is hopeful that his buildings will create affordable housing and perhaps bring in some young professionals and graduate students from Rockhurst, UMKC and Stowers Institute.

Having a medical-related use there, "is absolutely a new market for Troost and could absolutely be a game changer in terms of socio-economics of Troost. That's why everybody has been so encouraging about it," Farassati said.

Not quite everybody, though.

Neighbors whose yards back up to the proposed development filed a 29-page document with Kansas City planners detailing the ways they say it doesn't meet the city's various planning and development rules.

The document is written by Erik Olsen, an associate professor affiliated with the Urban Studies program at UMKC. Olsen, who bought his home on Gillham in 2006, said he moved in to become a part of the preservation of a historic Kansas City district.

With arguments reminiscent of the Brookside dispute, Hyde Park neighbors voiced concerns about the scale of Farassati's project, saying it's dramatically bigger than surrounding buildings and will mar the neighborhood and create parking problems. Unlike Brookside, they also worried about the impact on a historic area of town.

HEIGHT OF BUILDINGS TOPS CONCERNS FOR NEIGHBORS

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The block of Gillham homes is listed as “historic resources” on the city’s Midtown/Plaza area plan, and is included in the South Hyde Park historic district, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the signature letter says.

The tallest buildings in the area are three stories, with the majority one or two stories, the letter says. Moreover, the 60-foot height of KC Outlook is ten feet over the maximum allowed under zoning. That dramatic difference also violated the Troost Overlay planning guidelines, the letter said.



An early rendering of the proposed KC Outlook project.

“We would literally be living in the shadows of these buildings during the day and in the glare created by these buildings at night, which would adversely affect our homes and is clearly inconsistent with good planning,” Olsen added in an email to the Post.

Height isn’t the only problem they see. Neighbors have also objected to the amount of parking and buffering space, which they say does not meet city requirements. Farassati’s plan to lease unused space from other owners on the block will not solve the problem, Olsen said, because it would be temporary at best. Development encouraged by the Troost-Cleaver II plan would eliminate the borrowed or leased spaces in the future, he said.

Olsen and the neighbors also called out Farassati’s presentation to the neighborhood association in May as misleading. They noted the UMKC medical, pharmacy and nursing schools are not on the Volker campus, but three miles to the north on Hospital Hill, and therefore would not be as attractive to graduate students.

Patrick Sterrett, of Sterrett Urban LLC, is consultant on the project and responded to some neighbor objections. He said that the height of the buildings allows them to have a smaller footprint. That in turn, allowed architects to move the setbacks farther from the back yards. An earlier iteration had a lower height that brought the buildings’ western edge just thirty feet from the property lines. The higher elevation allows a 70-foot setback, he said.

He also disputed that future development will swallow up the leased parking spaces. The spaces will be on property that has already been developed and has a surplus of parking, he said. And locating near a rapid transit route qualifies the project for a lower parking ratio.

In addition, Sterrett said the housing will be useful not only to young professionals but to anyone looking for affordable housing.

Olsen also faults Farassati – [who has been a champion of open mic time and neighborhood meetings](#) – on transparency.

“I do not believe the developer has dealt fairly with the neighbors of the proposed KC Outlook project, and I am confident my neighbors feel similarly,” he said in an email, adding that the neighborhood was only contacted after the proposal was submitted and then only because outreach is required by the city. “I do not consider this to be dealing fairly with people in this community.”

Farassati and Sterrett said they approached every neighborhood immediately. Sterrett added that they told Troost coalition members two years ago they wanted to engage the community about the plan.

Farassati also provided a letter of support from the Historic Manheim Park Association, just across Troost to the east, signed by its president Sherita Williams. The area suffers from blight and crime, the letter says, “and has long been a point of weakness for the socio-economic development.”

“We provide our strong support for this project and look forward to a neighborhood partnership advancing the transformation of Troost.”

With city elections last month, not much has happened with KC Outlook since Farassati presented it to neighborhood last spring, Farassati said. It hasn't been before the city planning yet because of information and studies that are being completed.

He said he didn't advertise his development during the election because it's still early in the process and no request has been formed yet for public financing. But if constituents asked, he said, he was forthcoming about a project he believes will help Troost.

He doesn't understand how his detractors could compare the 4500 block of Troost with some of the luxury projects going on in Overland Park, he said.

“It's in one of the most blighted parts of KCMO,” he said. The city wants to encourage development there because, “it's a place where two murders a month happen there.” Many Overland Park projects on the other hand, are for higher priced apartments in popular areas of town.

“What is the comparison between Troost and Overland Park?”

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