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Kansas City's West Bottoms undergoes a retail rebirth

May 31--It's 8 a.m. on a sunny Friday morning and shoppers are filling their trunks and the backseats of their cars with their purchases. But this isn't a rush at the mall. It's the West Bottoms -- a historic area sitting below downtown Kansas City once renowned for its acres of stockyards -- and still about as anti-suburban mall as you can get. These brick warehouse and manufacturing buildings that date back to the 1880s and 1890s have held on, hoping to make a comeback. Since the 1950s, when the heyday of the stockyards ended, the West Bottoms has been on the decline. But after several stalled attempts at renewal, its time may be here. A variety of entrepreneurs have set up shop in increasing numbers over the past two years -- hip restaurants, antique and vintage vendors, a sign company, architects and art galleries, a hookah/tobacco cafe, and a tasting room for a Missouri wine. They're attracted to the low rent for sizable spaces, abundant

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parking, and easy interstate access. Shop owners also are tagging onto the popular First Friday gallery event in the Crossroads Arts District, drawing a stream of shoppers for art and antiques during the first weekend of the month. Some of this crowd is coming back later to dine or take in entertainment. A year ago, the city -- with feedback from area residents -- also changed the future land use policy for the West Bottoms from a "mostly heavy industrial use" to "mixed use," which includes industrial, commercial and residential. It also is contributing to the rebirth with more than \$20 million invested in new bridge overhauls, curbs and other infrastructure improvements. Next month, supporters of West Bottoms' revival efforts will convene a meeting to discuss how to keep the area's momentum going. And the Kansas City Design Center -- architecture students in masters programs at Kansas State University and the University of Kansas -- also will present their "urban vision" for the area on June 8. Despite the progress, the West Bottoms isn't exactly being gentrified, not when visitors might be parking next to a semi under an overpass, dodging trains that can stretch for miles, and looking to the nearest utility pole for homemade signs pointing directions to shops and restaurants. And that's part of the appeal. "The West Bottoms is not one thing, it is many things," said Bill Haw, a cattle rancher and longtime area developer who watches over the district from his office in the Livestock Exchange Building. "We're bringing the neighborhood up to something unexpected along with a new, kind of a tipping point I think, with the Dolphin Gallery, R Bar, and the Genessee RoyaleWe think something very special is happening here -- not manufactured entertainment district special -- but very entrepreneurial, locally driven, fun stuff going on." Haw has spent two decades on his dream, trying to turn a once largely deserted swath of streets and darkened buildings into a citywide draw that he believes is "appealing, approachable, and safe." His vision includes seeing more people living and working there, and more families visiting the area. Haw likes to distinguish between the areas north and south of Interstate 670, saying they have their own distinct

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personalities. The north area is perhaps a bit funkier with more of the antique and vintage shops, Jerry's Woodswether Cafe and Jaskki's Tobacco Cafe. The south area, home to his Livestock Exchange Building, the American Royal, Kemper Arena, the Golden Ox, Butler Manufacturing and the Dolphin Gallery, is a bit further along in its revival. John O'Brien, owner of the Dolphin Gallery, which relocated from the Crossroads district north of Union Station nearly three years ago, "was a pied piper for 39th Street, the Crossroads and now here," Haw said. "He wanted to come down and live my dream with me." O'Brien said he takes a piece of art and puts a frame around it to try to get someone to look at it in a different way, including the artist. "That's what we are trying to do down here," he said. "We've put a frame around it and named it -- the Stockyards District -- and turned the spotlight on it, saying it could be a real asset to the city." Both men want the growth to be organic instead of by a big master plan, even though they know growth will be dictated by market demand and other developers. Vacancy rates have decreased to 2.5 percent this year from 4.5 percent in 2008, said Carolyn Bagnall, director of research for the Kansas City office of Cassidy Turley, a commercial real estate company. But she cautions that data may be incomplete since some landlords may not be listing their property with commercial brokers. Still, retailers can rent nearly double the space for the same prices as some other shopping districts. Removing the stigma Liberty Belle needs the space. It carries everything from vintage porch swings to old Coca-Cola vending machines to birdcages. "This area is just genuine to what it is," said Linda Henderson, a partner in Liberty Belle, a year-old antiques store. Nick Allen and his family began hitting the antique shops for the First Friday weekend events, then decided to join the ranks of businesses. His Bella Patina opened in March with more than 20 antique and vintage vendors. He said there's a stigma for the area, that maybe it's not safe or it's too industrial, a place you don't want your car to break down in. But "there's a lot of business down here and it's starting to grow a buzz," Allen said. "So it's removing that stigma, drawing people from

the suburbs and expanding their borders a little bit to experience the city again." Aaron Blake opened Cardio Boxing by Aaron Blake a couple of years ago, living in first-floor warehouse space and stocking the other half with boxing equipment. In nicer weather, he'll raise the warehouse door high to give his clients a view of the downtown skyline. "I didn't want a place stuffed into a strip mall in the 'burbs," Blake said. "It's a place to get away from wherever you are. Kind of a unique escape." Haw knows all about the West Bottoms' entrepreneurial spirit. He purchased the nine-story, 1909-era Livestock Exchange Building in 1991. It is now nearly 90 percent occupied with professionals such as doctors, lawyers and investment bankers, along with artists who were attracted by the lofty spaces and natural light from wide windows. New neighboring restaurants, including R Bar & Restaurant and Genessee Royale Bistro, have been a "valuable asset" to the nearly 90 events being held at the Kemper Arena/American Royal the first six months of the year, said Shani Tate, spokeswoman for AEG, which manages the Kemper Arena. Shops and restaurants are spread over several blocks, so during First Friday weekends, Full Moon Productions now offers a free shuttle service to go with its four haunted houses and three new year-round tours including the "Ghosts of the Civil War" tour. "This is something that is good for all of us, to help the whole area," said Amber Arnett-Bequeaith, vice president of Full Moon Productions. "I think it's better for branding that it is one district -- the West Bottoms. " Up next In June, area agriculture experts, business executives, historians and politicians will gather at the 60-year-old Golden Ox restaurant to brainstorm on ideas to keep the momentum going in the West Bottoms. The project list could include more attractions and events, but also focus on drawing more businesses. One of the goals might be how to make the most of the area's agricultural heritage, said John Dillingham, who has a ninth-floor office in the Livestock Exchange Building. It's the office once occupied by his father, the late Jay B. Dillingham, a well-known civic leader who was president of the Kansas City Stockyards from 1948 to 1975. "Where you and I live is the Silicon

Valley of agriculture, or it should be," Dillingham said. "So why don't we have people from all over the world coming here to study what makes us unique? We'll get all these people together in one room and see what sticks." The West Bottoms also is getting some much needed infrastructure improvements. Public Improvements Advisory Committee funds also have put \$75,000 annually into the area since 2009 for sewers and sidewalk improvements. The city also has three major West Bottoms projects: a \$12 million overhaul of the 12th Street Viaduct, a \$10 million overhaul of the Forester Viaduct, and the department is looking at ways to improve the Woodswether Viaduct. "The West Bottoms has some of the oldest bridge stock in the city and some of the most used bridges in the city, dealing with a lot of commercial traffic," said Sean Demory, spokesman for the city's Capital Projects Department. "We're hoping to add to what's going on down there and we do expect this will be a benefit to the new influx of drivers." That's good news to Haw, who wants to continue to capitalize on the area's easy interstate access. He also would like to see the area add a hotel, a residential component, such as apartment buildings or condos, more (higher-paying) jobs, and recreational options for families, such as youth soccer fields. "All of those things are pointed towards a re-urbanization, a re-definition of where young people with families either want to live or where they gravitate to," Haw said. "We want them to gravitate towards the core instead of away from the core which they have been doing for the last 40 years or more." West Bottoms improvements --A \$12 million overhaul of the 12th Street Viaduct, which dates to 1914, should be completed in late November. --A \$10 million overhaul of the Forester Viaduct will be completed by early 2012 but open to traffic this fall. --The city also is looking at ways to improve the Woodswether Viaduct. To reach Joyce Smith, call 816-234-4692 or send email to jsmith@kstar.com.

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