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New fire station seen as catalyst for Bannister area

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To hear Lou Austin tell it, the impending construction of the new No. 41 fire station just east of Bannister Mall is fraught with symbolic meaning.

The new station, commencing construction any day, will give a nod to the westward trails that lay where the driveway is to be poured. It will acknowledge and become the new home for the No. 41 firefighter crew, six of whom died 17 years ago while responding to an enormous explosion at a construction site in southeast Kansas City. And looking to the future, the station will be an example of what this neighborhood can be - is in fact destined to be, Austin predicts.

For more than two years, Austin has been laboring to bring together this project that is on the verge of taking shape at 93rd and Hillcrest streets, where now an asphalt parking lot lies. Austin is chairman of the 3 Trails Village Community Improvement District, a collection of mostly business-owners in the Bannister Mall area who are working to resuscitate the area.

The station was to be built on the site of the existing one, at Bannister and Hillcrest. But the benevolent owner of a large part of Bannister Mall offered to swap properties, providing enough land for the Fire Department to do what it wished with the site.

The station is part of a department-wide upgrade, financed in large part by a quarter-cent sales tax approved in August 2001.

Mark Fennesy, a captain at Station 41, will be happy enough just to be in a building that works consistently. In the existing station, he said, "The boiler goes out constantly; the roof leaks. This station's very old."

Austin's vision is big, big, big. He's convinced the station will set a new tone for development in the area.

"It's a precisely crafted attack plan for economic revitalization," he said. The stoplight at 93rd and Hillcrest will be replaced with a roundabout, which Austin claims will offer a multitude of advantages over a stoplight. With 176 trees planted along Hillcrest and 80 more to be planted on Bannister Road, it's all "the beginning of the new vision and the new image."

Roundabouts have a track record of hiking the value of adjoining properties, according to Austin. They also cut accident rates and are more aesthetically pleasing than traffic signals. Austin garnered about \$1 million to finance the roundabout, including a fountain in its center.

"It's a psychological positive," Austin said. "They provide wonderful opportunities for art and landscaping."

Plans call for a fountain to be built in the center. It will be the first fountain in the city's Sixth District, Austin said.

The building itself will be throwback to the past. It will be made of masonry, with lintels and sills and coins lining the windows and the edges of the building in contrasting colors and textures.

