Editorial: Six months in, Rawlings’ GrowSouth pivot makes sense

Mayor Mike Rawlings continues to be a man of his word when it comes to the four-year GrowSouth initiative. While much of his team’s 2015 work hasn’t made headlines, it’s setting up an intriguing foundation for more rapid progress in southern Dallas.

At last spring’s annual community report, Rawlings acknowledged the need to modify tactics and sharpen some new tools in order to improve and grow the southern half of the city, which he describes as Dallas’ greatest potential asset.

Since then, the mayor’s GrowSouth team, led by Vana Hammond, has focused on four new strategies to accelerate Rawling’s long-term goals, particularly development of a thriving tax base in southern Dallas.

Only six months in, it’s too early to know whether this pivot will pay off. But based on what we’ve seen so far, the concentration makes a lot of sense. We not only appreciate the specificity of these four tactics but also believe they could be the game-changer that neighborhoods need.

Here’s our early assessment of where things are headed:

1. Mayor’s GrowSouth Advisory Council

Rawlings followed through on plans to establish this group of 20 neighborhood leaders to handle two jobs: Hosting meetings throughout southern Dallas — most recently in Pleasant...
Grove — to gather feedback and briefing Rawlings quarterly to share what they’ve learned. Their next meeting with the mayor is Jan. 12.

At last week’s meeting at a Pleasant Grove church, questions ranged from diversity of businesses in southeastern Dallas to how GrowSouth selects its target neighborhoods.

If this works like Rawlings hopes it will, more voices of southern Dallas residents and business owners will be heard — and stirred into city hall decision-making.

2. “Neighbor Up”

The mayor’s office is putting in place the structure for a hyper-local manager system in three neighborhoods that ideally would be able to dodge political turf battles and bureaucratic hurdles and more quickly solve pernicious problems dragging communities down.

The test areas for this collective impact effort are Parkdale–Urbandale in southeast Dallas and two south-central zones, one in the Lancaster corridor and the other around the University of North Texas–Dallas.

Along with Rawlings, Larry James, chief executive of the poverty-fighting CitySquare, will play a key role in the oversight council. The impressive leadership group also includes, among others, DISD Superintendent Michael Hinojosa, community colleges chancellor Joe May, County Judge Clay Jenkins, Dallas Police Chief David Brown and Parkland Memorial Hospital CEO Fred Cerise.

Next up? Get those three general managers hired by February and see how this works.

3. Cleaning up landlord practices

Rawlings has worked hard to win the cooperation of eight landlords who own the largest number of single-family rental houses in southern Dallas — a total of about 1,000 substandard properties. He’s persuaded five of the eight to sign a pledge to designate a company contact person to address City Hall concerns and allow interior code inspections.

One of those who declined the pledge, Dennis Topletz, was subsequently targeted in a city lawsuit for allegedly failing to make repairs, guarantee safe conditions and ensure that illegal drug activities don’t occur on the properties.

No doubt the legal move against Topletz should telegraph to the other landlords that Rawlings means business.

4. New home construction
Led by local housing analyst Ted Wilson, with Residential Strategies, a committee is putting together the best tactics to get 1,500 new homes built in the next four years in southern Dallas.

The group has helped identify potential builders and available vacant lots for the homes, targeted at $150,000 to $500,000. Already, more than 150 new single-family homes in this price range have been issued permits or completed permits.

At the same time, the GrowSouth team is working with offices throughout city hall to clear roadblocks that can drag down residential development efforts.

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We provide twice-yearly updates on the mayor’s GrowSouth initiative as a part of our own commitment to southern Dallas. Our effort, “Bridging Dallas’ North-South Gap,” is in its ninth year of working to end the economic and quality of life disparity within the city.

Just as we are mindful that many others who call southern Dallas home have been fighting this good fight far longer than we have, we also understand that this is a generational endeavor. Having a mayor who is making his own good-faith efforts to close the gap is no small piece of the solution.

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Cheryl Beck

My first job out of High School was at St Paul and over the next 5 years I earned so very much. Seeing the hospital torn down tears a small piece of my heart out. The Daughters of Charity and the doctors and staff of St Paul Hospital will always be with me.

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