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Big thinkers dare to dream up promising future for East St. Louis

- **SYLVESTER BROWN JR.**
- St. Louis Post-Dispatch (MO)
- May 6, 2007
- Section: Metro
- Edition: First Edition
- Page D1

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There are those who look at things the way they are, and ask why. ... I dream of things that never were, and ask 'Why not?' - Robert Kennedy, echoing playwright George Bernard Shaw

Thomas Zung, an architect with Buckminster Fuller, Sadao & Zung in Cleveland, used Kennedy's image and words during his presentation Thursday at the Chase Park Plaza Hotel. Zung was among several speakers at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis' conference who discussed a grand new vision for **East St. Louis**.

Why target a city with a decadeslong history of political corruption and vice, a city scarred by a deadly race riot in 1917 and a city that suffered an exodus of once-booming factories in the 1970s?

"In America, **East St. Louis** represents the impossible," said presenter Norman Kurland, president of the Center for Economic and Social Justice in Washington. "If we can do something symbolic here, we can do it anywhere around the globe."

Kurland, Zung and Leslie Dean Price, chairman and agent for Equitech International, a Virginia-based renewable energy firm, were among presenters describing a new **East St. Louis**. They spoke of a radically new social and economic project that would connect residents with land ownership and tap into renewable energy, toxic waste and biological science opportunities.

Actually, they described an expansion of an old vision developed in the early 1970s by Zung's friend and colleague, R. Buckminster Fuller. The late, famed dancer Katherine Dunham asked Fuller to develop a visionary proposal that would create economic opportunity and address the dire housing situation in her hometown, **East St. Louis**. Fuller, inventor of the environmentally friendly geodesic dome and other projects designed to remedy world problems, came up with a proposal to create a mile-wide domed city at an estimated cost of \$800 million. Unfortunately, the Old Man River Project, which promised to spark civic pride in **East St. Louis**, create jobs and provide housing for up to 50,000 people, languished partly due to sluggish support from community members and private capitalists.

The effort has been re-energized, thanks in large part to a local grant writer, Laura Zacher, who became intrigued by a report she'd read about the Old Man River Project. She contacted some of the original players who supported the project and Fuller's work - Kurland, Zung, Price and Illinois

Where smart shoppers

Rep. Wyvetter H. Younge, D-**East St. Louis**. Kurland described Younge as the "carrier of the dream" and Zacher as the new "spark."

"Laura is the one who helped open the doors to the Federal Reserve," he said. "Let's face it, it has the means to liberate people economically."

Backers of the proposal think the Federal Reserve could help empower local banks to help St. Clair County residents become stakeholders in land targeted for redevelopment. Banks backed by the Fed could offer interest-free credit, collateralized by the land and new green-friendly ventures, to a citizen-owned investment firm. Kurland's, Price's and Zung's organizations all have impressive records in creating, developing, funding and managing renewable and alternative energy companies. They see a city dedicated to much-needed global needs.

The concept, they say, follows the rationale of President Abraham Lincoln's Homestead Act, which turned thousands of people into owners of frontier land in the 1860s.

"It was the most important piece of legislation in the country," Kurland told me. "It allowed people to leave the farms, own land and build cities."

Younge recently introduced legislation (HB2352) to establish a citizen-owned, for-profit Community Investment Corporation Development Corporation in Illinois to help move things along. Backers of the revitalized **East St. Louis** plan have filed articles of incorporation for the Metro East Citizens Land Cooperative. If the bill passes, the group's members see themselves training "leaders" to promote such efforts in at least 20 Illinois municipalities.

The development plan includes a scaled-down version of Fuller's geodesic dome, this time as an international aquatic center focusing on fresh water technology solutions. The center, proponents say, will rival the Missouri Botanical Garden's work in plant biology. They also envision **East St. Louis** as an international cultural mecca for dance, theater and music, with an African-American arts center.

Dunham and Fuller once dreamed of something that never was - a revitalized, economically and culturally booming **East St. Louis**. Today, more than 35 years later, it seems their dedicated followers, joined by a fresh group of energetic dreamers, can finally say, "Why not?"

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