

# Two west-side aldermen energetic allies for change

▷ Continued from Page 1A

What the two aldermen from neighboring wards seek is nothing less than a reversal of fortunes in Rockford development. They want to draw to the west side some of the business and residential growth that has enriched the east side.

For the past few weeks, that has meant challenging the city's plan for spending \$3.5 million in federal development funds in 1998. It's a routine budgeting exercise that has gone virtually unscrutinized in years past.

## Pattern of neglect

McNeely and Thompson are seizing upon the process to make their case that the west side has suffered a pattern of neglect.

"We're not asking for all the money," Thompson said from her home on Hoban Avenue last week. "We're not asking for the whole pie. We just want a piece of it."

The debate has pitted McNeely and Thompson against city development staffers who deny shortchanging the west side. In fact, staffers contend that a majority of federal funds are invested on the west side.

Residents of the 7th and 13th wards have rallied behind their aldermen in a classic struggle between the "haves" and the "have-nots." Dozens of residents turned out Sept. 9 for a public hearing on the \$3.5 million budget, angrily demanding more development effort on the west side.

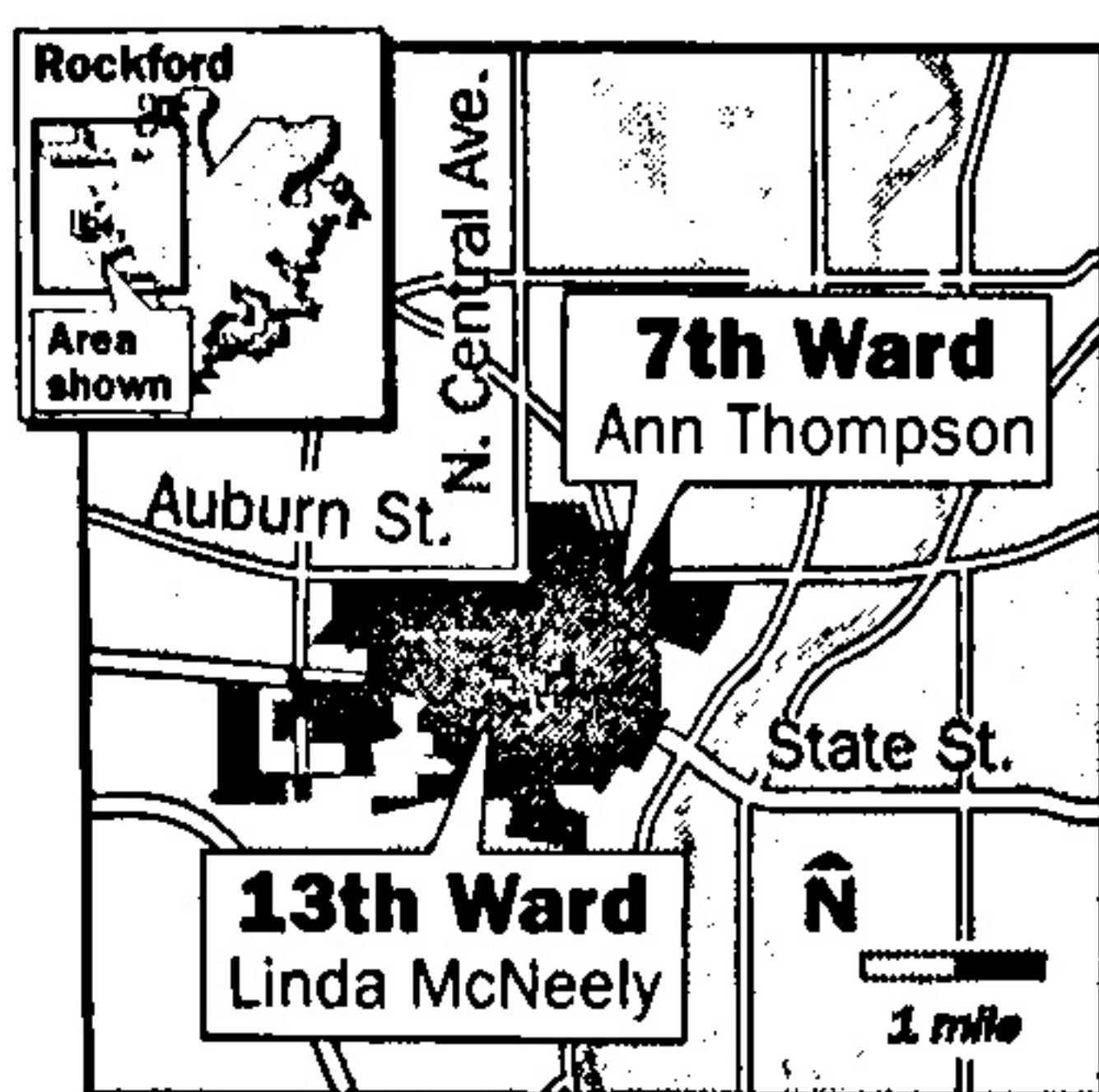
Cathy Johnson, director of the Friends House social center on Avon Street in the 13th Ward, said she hopes the battle results in more resources and more creative solutions from City Hall for the west side's economic woes.

Johnson's only concern is that McNeely and Thompson's in-your-face approach will trigger a backlash from east-siders.

"Things are being done in a way that could be much more divisive," she said.

For years, Thompson felt like a lone voice on the west side. Although neighboring aldermen agreed with her, she found herself standing alone when it came to challenging the status quo.

Elected in 1993, the 47-year-old divorcee labored four years to draw attention to the west side's prob-



Rockford Register Star

lems.

"It was like I was talking to myself," she said.

Then, a vacancy in the 13th Ward brought McNeely into the picture. Appointed in January, she won a four-year term in the April elections just as Thompson was winning her second term.

McNeely and Thompson quickly found common ground. Both are Democrats. Both are single women in their 40s. Both are native west-siders. Both graduated from Auburn High School.

Although not particularly acquainted with each other previously, they became sisters in solidarity when it became clear both felt strongly about bringing large-scale urban renewal west of the Rock River.

"We're not running around the city hand-in-hand," McNeely said last week. "But it appears we have the same perspective."

## 'They could connect'

The relationship not only has given McNeely a mentor, Thompson has been re-energized knowing she has an ally.

Amy Hill, a veteran activist from the 7th Ward, said Thompson was frustrated during her early years on the city council by the perceived lack of cooperation from other aldermen.

Hill, recently appointed to the county board, said McNeely's willingness to join the cause has boosted Thompson's confidence visibly.

"When Linda came along, it helped Ann," she said. "They could connect."

During the weekly city council sessions, McNeely and Thompson regularly cite west-side properties troubled by excessive trash, rowdy residents or other nuisances. Both demand answers when the prob-

## What's next

The community development plan for 1998 federal funds will be considered by the Rockford City Council's Planning and Development Committee at 5:15 p.m. Monday, Sept. 22, at City Hall, 425 E. State St., second floor.

lems are not addressed quickly.

In August, they raised eyebrows by publicly challenging the annual reappointment of Diane Voneida, the city's \$79,000-a-year community development director. They were outvoted 11-2.

Ald. Victory Bell, who represents the 5th Ward on the west side, said he disagreed with them on Voneida but is heartened to see McNeely and



Victory Bell

Thompson's efforts to push west-side issues to the forefront.

Bell, the first black elected to city council in 1972, is credited with breaking down barriers for minority hiring and representation. Some

are disappointed he has not brought more sweeping changes to the west side.

Bell, 63, said he is pleased to see younger aldermen picking up the cause.

"I believe they're sincere in their efforts," he said. "I would continue to encourage that."

McNeely and Thompson plan to keep up the fight when the \$3.5 million in federal development funds comes before the city council for a vote.

They describe past efforts at west-side development as tokenism that has been ill-planned and ill-managed. McNeely said she wants bigger plans for bringing growth to the west side, the same way it has been accomplished elsewhere in the city.

"I will continue to protest in whatever manner possible," she said. "I will continue until we know that there's something on paper, that there's a commitment."