



KCUR 89.3

Kemper Arena Redevelopment Project Gets Historic Tax Credit Boost

By FRANK MORRIS • SEP 12, 2016



Preservationist Elizabeth Rosin explains why Kemper Arena is eligible for historic tax credits

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Kemper Arena qualifies for historic tax credits that will effectively cut the cost of remodeling the long-empty complex by about 40 percent, according to developers.

The Foutch Brothers development group plans to use credits, along with private financing, to fund a \$20 to \$30 million project to turn Kemper into a hub for youth sports, with two levels of courts, fields and tracks operating year-round.

City Councilman Scott Taylor says that kind of development could turbo charge redevelopment already happening in the West Bottoms.

“This will only be a catalyst for more activity. We’ll have many new families to use the facility. They will need places to eat, places to shop. That will be great for the historic West Bottoms businesses,” says Taylor.

But even though Kemper might get a new lease on life, it won't have the same name.

A chain of clinics called Mosaic Life Care is sponsoring the arena redevelopment, and Kemper will be renamed when it reopens. Developer Steve Foutch says the historic designation propels the project into a new intense phase.

He says they will be nailing down commitments from possible tenants, securing financing and trying to get a proposal before the City Council before the end of the year. Kemper currently generates almost no money, and costs the city about \$1 million a year to maintain. It would cost about \$10 million to demolish it.

Kemper is only 42 years old, which is fairly young to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. But Elizabeth Rosin, a preservationist who developers hired to shepherd the application for Kemper’s historic designation, says the building is straight out of late '60s or early '70s America.

“As a property type, the area responded to a community that said, we have money in our pockets, we have free time, entertain us,” says Rosen. “Kemper quickly became a touchstone to a generation of Kansas Citians.”

Rosin says Kemper-era arenas have become economically obsolete, because they don’t have anywhere near the number of luxury boxes that modern centers have. And those boxes generate lots of cash. She says a lot of them have already been torn down, so Kemper is a rare survivor.

Rosin says Kemper is very cool architecturally, but lost its claim to architectural significance with the major remodeling the city did to try to prop the arena up in the 1990s.

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