

## Tackling rebuilding in target areas

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*Author: Roger Showley*

Heritage Days, Antique Row, Asia Town and the Yellow Brick Road (with palm trees) are the talk these days on the streets of Mid-City.

Mid-City is so big -- the largest community planning area in the city with about nearly 200,000 residents -- that residents and businesses don't even use that name when referring to where they live and shop.

They prefer one of nine neighborhood names that comprise the area: University Heights, Normal Heights, Kensington, Talmadge Park, City Heights, Oak Park, Rolando, Redwood and portions of Montezuma. For planning purposes, North Park and the State College community planning areas are included in Mid-City commercial revitalization effort.

But no matter where they live and work, Mid-City residents and businesses are tackling the rebuilding program, starting with four target areas: Adams Avenue between 32nd and 36th streets; El Cajon Boulevard; University Avenue in North Park between Idaho Street and Interstate 805; and University Avenue in City Heights between I-805 and Euclid Avenue.

Special low-interest loan programs are being offered by the city, working with the Bank of America in the area, and design consultants have been hired to help property owners and businesses coordinate facade and interior improvements.

o Adams Avenue has the shortest stretch of commercial zoning in Mid-City with fewer problems than the other target areas. Consultants recommend that the area be developed further as an "antique row" and entertainment district, feeding off of the popularity of the Ken Theater just east of 40th Street in Kensington. Producer Todd Blakesley hopes to open "Cigars and Stripes" April 18 in the now-dark Adams Avenue Theater. "Cigars and Stripes" is an audience-participation theatrical production which uses political conventions as a dramatic device. Consultants also hope to add sit-down restaurants of the quality of Three Mermaids Polish Restaurant at Wilson and Adams.

Property owner Joe Greeno has completed (without city subsidy) renovation of two buildings at the northeast and southwest corners of Felton and Adams and is completing the exterior restoration of a third building at the southeast corner -- a former karate school.

Safeway plans to start construction this summer on a new \$950,000, 30,000-square-foot supermarket east of the target area on Cherokee, to replace the existing 19,713-square-foot store on the site. Extensive landscaping improvements are planned. The

chain already has opened a new store at Campus Plaza at 62nd and El Cajon Boulevard, redone another store at Fairmount Avenue and Landis Street and plans to replace another at 30th and Howard streets. It converted the store on Park Boulevard into a Liquor Barn and has a sixth store at 30th and Grape.

"It has been our policy to redevelop and stay in established downtown areas," said Safeway real estate representative Joy Polgrean. "We think Mid-City will remain a viable area."

"The bottom line," said Doug Generoli, president of the Adams Avenue Merchants Association, "is there have to be some changes that occur on the avenue and these have to be very visible changes, so that people notice something is going on and people are attracted to investigate investment opportunities. That's the only way I believe you'll get new business."

A demonstration block for testing sidewalk and street improvements is proposed between 33rd and Felton streets. But construction must await receipt of federal community development block-grant funds and establishment of an assessment district to maintain new landscaping.

In addition, Adams Avenue businesses and firms through Mid-City are thinking about establishing business improvement districts. Firms in the districts would pay higher business license fees. The proceeds would underwrite special events and promotional campaigns to attract more customers.

o North Park needs spruced up storefronts and redirected merchandising, the consultants said, and Mid-City's only major department store, Penney's, is spending up to \$100,000 in its first modernization in years. Broader fashion lines will be introduced by the time work is completed in June; there will be more housewares and the mezzanine will be reopened.

"The Penney Co. is trying to go along with some of the urban revitalization plans," said store manager Anthony Moore, who previously ran the Penney outlet at Fashion Valley. "We are not just totally deserting the downtown areas or lower economic areas."

However, Moore said the renovation is a gamble: "There still are a number of buildings that are vacant here. We definitely need some new blood in here to attract new people who are moving into the area. I do have a feeling that there's more interest in building in North Park and I think it will be for the better. But as for how successful it will be, I don't know yet."

Sandy Sacks, owner for 35 years of Sandy's Shoes in North Park, said he has noticed that many customers are reacting against congested conditions around regional shopping centers and the impersonal service offered by chain stores.

"There's more of a small-town atmosphere in North Park to draw people back to," he

said.

Indeed, Sonny Sturn, the Ernest W. Hahn Inc. marketing manager who oversaw Fashion Valley's initial opening, said regional centers are reassessing their practices. The Hahn project at Horton Plaza, Sturn said, is approaching the market in the same way as North Park and other districts that predate the shopping-center era.

"The industry is recognizing the fact that in order to keep the customer, it has to do things to keep the customer happy," Sturn said. "What's happened in Mid-City is an example of what the consumers are saying. People who went out there (to suburban shopping centers) for free parking and convenience are now saying they want to be treated as individuals and prefer better service. It's sort of a recycle but with additions to it. It's like going back to the clothing of the '40s but with different materials."

The demonstration block in North Park would stretch from 30th to Ohio on University. The Jerde Partnership, the architectural firm for Hahn's Horton Plaza project, has completed drawings calling for wider sidewalks, sidewalk cafes and extensive landscaping and improvements in signs and storefront facades. Funding, as in Normal Heights, also must await receive of federal funds and creation of another assessment district.

o El Cajon Boulevard, an eight-mile-long corridor from Park Boulevard to the La Mesa city border, is one of the longest shopping strips in San Diego County, and even longer if the westward extension over State 163 onto Washington Street is included.

Criterion Inc. of San Diego and The Goodkin Group of La Jolla, which produced last year's Mid-City economic analysis, said the boulevard suffers from too many empty-looking car lots and service stations. Improvements might include establishing a "stereo district," encouraging high-density residential projects and bringing in restaurants and offices between Park Boulevard and Interstate 805. The area east of 54th Street in the College area is considered well on its way toward revitalization and therefore not in immediate need of special city treatment, officials and consultants said.

"El Cajon Boulevard has the potential to be a 'grande boulevard,'" said the Cal Poly Pomona students in their urban design program prepared at city expense last year, "primarily due to its width and openness and also because it is an entryway to Mid-City. Dramatic large-scale buildings and landscaping can help achieve this effect. The deteriorating buildings and underused car sales lots should be improved or replaced."

John Hartley, president of the El Cajon Boulevard Business Association, said one idea gaining support is to pave the medians along the boulevard in yellow stamped concrete and plant palm trees.

"It's catchy and corny, but after a while, everybody liked it," Hartley said. However, he acknowledged that this idea must be weighed against a more long-range possibility that the San Diego Trolley might be extended along El Cajon Boulevard.

Hartley said another effort under way is to coordinate advertising and promotion among restaurants and furniture stores. "If we promote in areas, like Gaslamp Quarter does, and we got good P.R., press, parades and festivals, literally everybody on the strip could get the same benefit."

To kick off the promotional campaign, Hartley said boulevard businesses plan to sponsor "Heritage Days" during America's Finest City Week in August. The festival would highlight the stores and activities of various ethnic groups in Mid-City and along El Cajon Boulevard. No demonstration or target area for improving streets and sidewalks has been selected so far.

But Hartley and other Mid-City leaders said that one obstacle in the way of the boulevard's revival is the increase in prostitutes and drug trafficking.

Hartley said churches, business groups, community organizations, the Police Department and Councilwoman Gloria McColl are all working together to drive the social problems away.

"It's getting really ugly," he said. "I'm determined to knock it out. I think we can do it before summer."

o City Heights is using the influx of Asian residents and businesses into the area to its advantage in revitalizing University Avenue east of Interstate 805.

Trang Kien, president of the Vietnamese Merchants Association, said 20 of the 30 Vietnamese restaurants in San Diego operate in Mid-City and 60 percent of his organization's members do business there.

"I think if more and more Vietnamese people are involved in business with American people, it would help redevelop the area," he said. The San Diego Chamber of Commerce is helping the association educate members about business practices, he said.

The State Theater on El Cajon Boulevard and Euclid Street has become a mini-Asia Town with several restaurants, shops and other ethnic-oriented services. Another center of activity is at 42nd and University. By capitalizing on this ethnic flavor, the city's consultants said, "Asia Town" could become a tourist draw comparable to San Francisco's Chinatown. The target area for revitalization efforts is proposed between I-805 and Euclid with the demonstration block between 42nd and 43rd on University.

Vola Mitchell, chairwoman of the City Heights Revitalization Committee, said she welcomes the increased ethnic diversity of the area but believes progress depends on greater cooperation from businesses on the avenue which do more trade by phone than from walk-in traffic.

"The main thing I've been working on is to get the merchants to clean the sidewalks and gutters," Mitchell said, "because putting in trees and still having trash around isn't going to do anything."

Mitchell has operated her business at 42nd and University for 37 years, first as a radio and appliance store and then, after shopping centers took away customers, as a hardware and then gift shop. But she continues to sell pressure cooker parts because regional shopping centers do not carry enough replacement inventories. Portuguese tourists from the Azore Islands in the Atlantic make periodic visits to her store to pick up pressure cooker parts.

Revitalization is starting to occur, she said, especially around the old East San Diego City Hall across from her store. But she added that property owners should refrain from raising rents so high that small businesses must relocate.

Caption: 4 PICS 1 MAP

1. Mid-City (see map) encompasses nine neighborhoods, including City Heights , where Vola Mitchell, far left, is campaigning for cleaner streets; North Park, left, where shoppers on University Avenue near 30th Street soon will see upgraded streets and sidewalks; and El Cajon Boulevard, below left, as it appeared, unpaved and undeveloped, before 1910 near the intersection of 43rd Street. 2. Plans are nearly complete for major improvements to North Park's business district, as prepared by the architectural firm of the Jerde Partnership. Looking south on Ray Street from University Avenue, sidewalks would be widened, new landscaping and street furniture are proposed and special brick paving would be included in the street to encourage more pedestrian activity. (F-9) 1. The San Diego Union/Carol Woods 2. San Diego Historical Society-Ticor Collection

*Edition: 1,2*

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*Page: F-6*

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