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The new face of Havana takes shape

Corridor in western Aurora reshaped by Gayle-force wind

By **BRANDON JOHANSSON**
The Aurora Sentinel

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When the Havana Business Improvement District asked metro-area residents what they thought about Havana Street a few years ago, terms of endearment didn't flood in.

"That first year, it was rough," said Gayle Jetchick, executive director of the district. "They said it was old, run-down, we wouldn't go there, it's scary."

The iconic stretch of Colorado State Highway 30 had fallen on difficult times in the early 2000s, with retailers fleeing the old Buckingham Square Mall and surrounding area. And when the retailers left and the shops were boarded up, shoppers stopped coming, too.

But, more than two years after voters along the Havana Street corridor — by a margin of 4 to 1 — opted to form the Havana BID, the once-troubled stretch of road is making a comeback.

Since 2007, the assessed value along the BID — which runs from East Sixth Avenue south to East Dartmouth Avenue — has grown from \$73.3 million to \$86.2 million. And from 2008 to 2009, vacancy rates at the businesses along Havana fell slightly, from 8.2 percent to 8 percent.

"It's changed," Jetchick said of Havana Street. "It's nice now and people are starting to come back."

With a budget of about \$350,000 — money that comes from the tax hike voters approved in 2007 — and a full-time staff of one, the district has organized dozens of events along Havana in recent years, helping to bring shoppers back to the once-popular area.

The events along Havana come at a feverous pace — hamburger month in May to the Cruzin' Havana car show June 19 to the summer-long concert series at The Gardens on Havana.

The seemingly nonstop string of events draw more than 15,000 additional people to the area each year, 8,000 of those for the car show alone, according to Jetchick's estimate. And, she said, they are an important part of bringing shoppers back to the area.

Businesses along Havana say the events have helped them get exposure and contact customers who otherwise might not know about them.

"We've been swamped on those days and we've had people come back from them," said Annette Cosentino, owner of the English Tea Cup near Havana and East Jewell Avenue.

Cosentino said the events, including a chocolate tasting, and the promotional work done by the BID have helped to attract people who didn't know the store specializing in English goods was there.

"They've been really, really helpful and you have seen a difference in the clientele coming up and down Havana," she said.

For Jetchick, running the BID has meant learning her way around city bureaucracies and trying to get a grasp on the minutiae of government — from restrictions on banners and signs to rules for landscaping.

Last year, for example, the BID lobbied the city to change some of the rules for landscaping and sidewalks along Havana.

Before the changes, some businesses were reluctant to perform basic maintenance because they feared any improvements would lead to city officials forcing them to make costly improvements to their sidewalks and landscaping, Jetchick said.

With the changes, businesses only have to make some of those changes and as a result, they've been willing to improve the exterior of their businesses.



THE NEW FACE OF HAVANA A sign sits near East Alameda Avenue and Havana Street in Aurora on June 7. More than two years after voters along the Havana Street corridor opted to form a business improvement district, the once-troubled stretch of road is making a comeback. (Heather A. Longway/The Aurora Sentinel)



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"It's kind of boring," Jetchick said of the changes. "But when you get right down to it in dollars and cents, it makes a difference to these businesses."

For the businesses along Havana, the changes — particularly the redevelopment of the Buckingham site — has been a welcome sight.

Paul Suss at Suss Pontiac has been on Havana Street for more than 30 years. In that span, the area has gone from a bustling shopping district at the height of Buckingham's success to a bleak stretch of road toward the mall's final days.

Now, with the area booming again, Suss has watched things come full circle.

"Quite frankly, the positive comments have been pretty plentiful," he said. "People who haven't been on our street in a long time say this is pretty nice down here."

Much of the new development along Havana has centered on East Mississippi Avenue and Havana Street, where Buckingham stood for years.

The Gardens on Havana, a \$110-million development with retail shops and restaurants on the 50-acre parcel, saw its first new tenants move in 2009.

The project helped revitalize the area, but hasn't gone exactly according to plan.

Initially, The Gardens were supposed to include townhomes and apartments above the retail shops on its main street. But amid the financial crisis that rocked the lending industry, that element of the project fell through.

And, since it opened, leasing the store fronts along the main street has been slower than business leaders hoped, Jetchick said.

The slow leasing and the lack of residential space can both be attributed to the down economy, which started its tailspin less than a year after the BID formed in late 2007.

Jetchick said that while the down economy has hindered some plans along Havana, she is confident the BID has helped Havana weather the economic storm.

"If we had not had this mechanism in place to coordinate all these events, to bring people into the district, to help the businesses, we would see a lot more vacant store fronts, I am sure," she said.

Looking ahead, Jetchick and the BID have their sights set on another rough stretch of Havana, this one near East First Avenue and the dilapidated Fan Fare building.

City officials last year announced a redevelopment plan for Fan Fare and the Havana North neighborhood, which runs from about East Exposition Avenue north to East Sixth Avenue.

A blight study on the area is expected to be complete this summer, then Jetchick said officials will begin work on figuring out what to do with the asbestos-filled Fan Fare building.

While work on the Buckingham redevelopment was lengthy and challenging, some in the city say fixing Havana North and knocking down Fan Fare will be an even bigger challenge.

Former Aurora City Councilman Larry Beer said that while The Gardens project is one of the most important in the city's recent history, redeveloping Havana North will likely be even more challenging because of the asbestos. But, Beer said, repairing that stretch of Havana is crucial to area's future.

"Havana Street is absolutely changing for the better, and I really hope that the positive changes are moving toward the north," he said.

For Jetchick, fixing Havana North and Fan Fare is particularly important because she lives not far from East Sixth Avenue and Havana.

"It's been way too long," Jetchick said of the infamous white building. "It's time to do something with it."

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