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Havana Street looks for a revival Business owners on a stretch of the road want a way to attract people to the area again. They may tax themselves to pay for it.

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Aurora - The marquee outside the Fan Fair liquor store reads "Coldest beer in town."

Unfortunately for owner Samuel Lee, hardly anyone is noticing it.

"This area is really getting down," said Lee, owner of the liquor store on Havana Street near East Sixth Avenue for 14 years. "I don't know why it fell down so fast."

Businesses along that stretch of Havana in Aurora have seen more shutters than customers in recent years. Patrons are going to newer areas to shop, like Southlands and City Center of Aurora.

So business owners along Havana recently started a petition drive to create a business improvement district, which would allow them to tax themselves to make the area more inviting for customers. The business owners would vote in November.

With the tax, expected to generate about \$370,000 annually, they'd be able to pay for pedestrian-friendly sidewalks, signage, banners, marketing and other things that could draw in people and make the area more appealing.

The 4.5-mile stretch of Havana Street between East Sixth and East Dartmouth avenues is a mix of business, commercial space and 26 car dealerships.

In the northern section, there are few businesses and vacant shops. The southern portion is more bustling, but also loud and uninviting. In the middle sits the former **Buckingham Square mall**, now vacant, waiting for a makeover from a private developer that would transform it to be the centerpiece of Havana's revival.

Miller Windgarten plans to bulldoze the mall except for the Target store, which would be incorporated into the redevelopment plan. The mall would be replaced by 350,000 square feet of retail space that would follow the current trend of outdoor urban-village-

themed retail.

Plans are for the space to have a rose garden with trellises and a public plaza with a water feature, benches, grass and trees.

"Buckingham Square was a thriving center of attraction, with events at the center court, high school concerts, dog shows," said Arnie Schultz, head of the Village East Neighborhood Association who has lived near Buckingham for 30 years. "That's what we are looking for again, a public gathering place."

A big eyesore on Havana is the old Fan Fare site at East Third Avenue, the city's first mall. The building, which features a roof like the top of a soccer ball, has been vacant for years and still needs asbestos abatement.

Plans for two high-rises there a few years ago got business owners like Lee excited, only to see the developer pull out because of finances. Now the developer is trying to revive his plan.

Maybe the business improvement district will bring back others, too, some say. Businessmen like Paul Suss, owner of Suss Buick Pontiac GMC, say it's now or never if the corridor is to survive.

Havana should be a place to be rather than a place to pass through, Suss said. He cites the Belmar development in Lakewood that morphed the old Villa Italia Mall into a community gathering place.

"I've been on Havana for 26 years," Suss said. "There were a ton of people. Joslins was across the street, they had their moonlight sale. Those were the times when you thought, 'Wow, this street is really rocking and rolling.'"

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