CAPITOL HILL TIMES

08/24/2006

Major change along 12th Avenue

By Doug Schwartz

The Trace Lofts renovation project on 12th Avenue and East Madison Street, which, in combination with the adjacent North Lofts project, will add nearly 150 residential units to the street. Photo/Doug Schwartz

Saying there is a lot of development in the works on Capitol Hill is something of a mild understatement. But while much of the attention has understandably been focused on Broadway, especially the former QFC and Safeway sites at the north end of the street, a great deal of new construction is under way along the Pike-Pine corridor.

Consider The Braeburn, on East Pine Street between 13th and 14th avenues, a 159-unit condominium project. Or the Walgreens-Capitol Hill Housing joint effort well under way at the corner of Broadway and East Pine Street.

Several other large developments are in their early stages as well. An 80-unit project with ground-level retail is being planned for 1500 East Madison Street, where Thumpers now stands. A huge mixed-use project is slated for most of the block that is now home to BMW of Seattle, between Harvard and Boylston avenues and Pike and Pine streets.

But arguably the most dramatic changes are taking place along 12th Avenue. Looking south from East Pike Street and you'll immediately notice a great deal of activity already in progress. Several large projects, along with considerable renovation, will likely transform an area that, if urban density is a desirable neighborhood goal, could be considered underutilized.

Inside the newly renovated space at 1429 12th Avenue, Café Stellina co-owners Teri Esensten and Mike Cicon are getting ready for the café's Thursday, Aug. 23, opening. Extensive remodeling work continues next door for the future home of Osteria La Spiga, which will relocate into its new home in October from a dramatically smaller space in the Harvard Market.

"We can't wait to finally open," said Esensten. "We think this is going to be a great place for us."

Liz Dunn owns the Piston and Ring Building, which is home to the two upcoming restaurants. She also owns the buildings that are home to Retrofit, a furniture store open for about a year, and the Pacific Supply Company. Dunn, who lives in the neighborhood, is developing several other projects along 12th, including a mixed-use project being built at the corner of 12th Avenue and East Pike Street. That project features double-height, loft-style apartments. The street-level retail space is expected to be filled by a large restaurant. Assuming a strike by concrete workers, which is affecting construction work across the city, is settled soon that building should be complete in roughly a year.

Two larger developments by the ek Real Estate Group are being built across the street. At the corner of 12th Avenue and East Madison Street, the Trace Lofts renovation will add 42 condominiums and ground-level retail to the street in a former warehouse. Adjacent immediately to the north, the North Lofts, a new construction on what was mostly undeveloped property, includes 100 new condominiums and more than 8,000 square feet of retail space.

Dunn's project is joined in a marketing capacity with the 12th and Madison project. They share a website and, she said, a marketing approach that favors smaller, independent and local businesses, businesses that ideally add more to the neighborhood than generic chain stores.

"We want to lease to an eclectic mix of businesses and not to large national chains," she said. "It's probably harder economically in the short term, but it pans out over time. It's good business to take a long term view. Finding the right tenant for the neighborhood makes good economic sense over time."

Dunn's motivations are not simply developer idealism. The projects need to pencil out financially. But she believes in a longer term view.

"Of course the neighborhood needs basic services. But we have enough chain stores in the neighborhood, many close by at the Harvard Market," she said. "The kinds of businesses that give a neighborhood character, the ones people are always talking about, are what we're after.

Dunn agrees that the changes coming to 12th Avenue are substantial. When construction is complete, her vision will have had a considerable effect on the neighborhood's evolution. So far, she said, most, but not all, responses have been positive. She said that reactions have become more enthusiastic when details of the projects have been explained in depth. That the street was in some ways a blank slate also allowed for a less adversarial neighborhood response.

"Change often adds suspicion. But I think when people saw things like the renovation of the Pacific Supply façade we gained some credibility. The neighborhood supports density, which is one of my goals," she said.

Dunn's next venture, which had its early design review last week, is a 40-unit residential project that abuts the Piston & Ring Building. The project is at least a year away from getting its permit. It's approach will be from 11th Avenue, and Dunn said her hope is that the project will open up that street and provide natural connections to the 12th Avenue buildings.

"This stretch of 12th will be a different and better place," Dunn said. "I know my neighbors and they know me. I'm hopeful people will get and appreciate what we're trying to do here."

Doug Schwartz is the editor of the Capitol Hill Times. He can be reached at editor@capitolhilltimes.com or 461-1308.

©Pacific Publishing Company 2007