

The Elbert Files: Reinventing sixth avenue

Des Moines' Sixth Avenue corridor is poised for the kind of rebirth that Valley Junction saw in the 1970s and '80s, that Court Avenue has been experiencing since the 1990s, and that has transformed the East Village since 2000.

Momentum is coming from many of the same factors that drove change in the other areas: a strong sense of local history coupled with low property values and an urban entrepreneurial spirit.

It won't happen overnight, but a nonprofit called 6th Avenue Corridor Inc. has been quietly putting pieces in place for a major rejuvenation of the 1.2-mile stretch of Sixth Avenue between the Des Moines River and University Avenue.

Recent accomplishments include:

- Bankers Trust Co.'s announcement early this month of discounted loan rates for businesses that locate or start up in the Sixth Avenue area.
- Creation last fall of a revitalization plan by BNIM Architects.
- Development of a streetscape plan similar to ones already in place on Court Avenue and Ingersoll Avenue.
- Support from the Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation for a major art installation on the Sixth Avenue bridge across the Des Moines River.

The ultimate goal, said Laura Peters, executive director of 6th Avenue Corridor Inc., is to create a new identity as a pedestrian-friendly live-work community that takes advantage of existing assets that include Mercy Medical Center and a large immigrant population.

Plans call for new apartment-style housing that could accommodate many of Mercy's more than 4,000 employees, Peters said.

Developer Jack Hatch has shown interest in the area, she added, and is working on funding for proposals similar to projects he has done in Cedar Rapids, Sherman Hill and the East Village.

Another goal is to attract new niche businesses, many of which are expected to come from Hispanic and Asian immigrants who have moved into the area in recent years. An early example is C-Fresh, an international market that recently moved into the vacant Top Value Food store and is attracting customers from throughout Central Iowa.

Community events will also draw on the cultural heritage of a population that is considered one of the most diverse in the state, Peters said.

Much of the nonprofit's ongoing activity, she said, has focused on the historical fabric of the neighborhood, which was originally called North Des Moines and was one of the city's earliest suburbs.

When North Des Moines was incorporated in 1880, it was the 19th-century equivalent of West Des Moines or Waukee. It was a place where up-and-coming business leaders built homes. Early residents included Edward Temple, the founder of what today is Principal Financial Group Inc., and Charles Weitz Jr., whose family built one of the nation's largest construction companies.

In 1890, North Des Moines was one of seven suburbs that were merged into Des Moines as part of a unique tax equalization law that extended the city's boundaries 2 ½ miles in all directions, creating a nearly sixfold increase in the city's size.

When Interstate 235 came through Des Moines in the 1960s, the superhighway effectively cut off the Sixth Avenue corridor from downtown, and the area, which was already suffering from neglect, spiraled downward for many years.

An earlier revitalization effort in the 1990s floundered. A new effort began in 2009 when 6th Avenue Corridor Inc. was created and won recognition as one of the state's 51 Main Street Iowa communities.

Today, the nonprofit is urging restoration of several commercial buildings along Sixth Avenue, including a two-story brick structure at 1601 Sixth Ave. (Sixth and College avenues) built in 1888 as the city hall for North Des Moines.

The building is older than Des Moines' City Hall and is the only municipal building still standing in any of the seven suburbs that were merged into Des Moines in 1890.