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## New optimism in quest to revive Sacramento's Del Paso Boulevard

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After decades of failed attempts, city officials and neighborhood activists say they finally have momentum in the effort to reverse the downward spiral of Del Paso Boulevard, the gritty main street of north Sacramento.

Local business owners and developers are in negotiations to purchase some of the 12 properties the city owns along the boulevard. In the meantime, a marketing consultant working for the neighborhood's business association is attempting to brand the area as a "design district" that appeals to small businesses.

"It's like this blank canvas, and there's an opportunity now to fill it in with the right pieces," said Andrea Lepore, a restaurateur and developer who consults with the Del Paso Boulevard Partnership on branding and marketing efforts. "That opportunity, to work with 10 uninterrupted blocks, is so rare."

Lepore, a co-owner of the popular Hot Italian restaurant in midtown, said four local business owners are in talks with city officials to buy properties on the boulevard. The city-owned stretch represents a rare concentrated public ownership of land.

“Ideally, we don’t want the city owning this property much longer,” said Councilman Allen Warren, who represents the area and whose development firm has an office on Del Paso Boulevard. “We’d like to find people with an interest in being a part of a renaissance on the boulevard.”

The negotiations over the city parcels could be complicated by the fact that the properties were previously controlled by the city’s now-defunct redevelopment agency, meaning that the city will need the approval of the state Department of Finance before selling the land. Leslie Fritzsche, with the city’s economic development department, said city officials are still confident that process will be smooth.

Lepore would not identify the business owners negotiating to buy the city land, but she provided some details on the projects they are seeking to build.

The crop includes a local graphic design firm, a local brewery and a developer interested in building a midsize apartment building on the boulevard. Lepore said a well-known local chef wants to open a “culinary center” that would include not only a restaurant, but also other food-related amenities. She said she could not provide more details because the negotiations were ongoing.

In addition to the four properties involved in the negotiations, Lepore is also working on a plan to rehab the former Grand Theatre, which opened in 1942 but closed in 1960 and has been used by various churches. The city now owns the building, and the state would also need to approve its sale.

The concept for the Grand Theatre, which once featured a neon sign facing Del Paso Boulevard, is to reopen the space as a movie theater serving full meals and adult drinks, similar to the Parkway Theater in Oakland.

There are also plans for a public market to cover multiple properties on the boulevard. The market – the idea of prominent designer and furniture retailer Dan Friedlander – would include permanent vendors selling meat, bread and produce. Friedlander was not available for comment, but Warren said the project is moving forward and work could begin early next year.

“People will come here if you give them a reason,” Lepore said.

What’s clear is that businesses that require heavy foot traffic – a coffee shop chain, for example – likely won’t work in an area that does not attract the kind of crowds seen in midtown, Lepore said. Instead, she said the goal should be to create destinations along the boulevard.

That strategy has had some success already in the area. The monthly food and design market attracts between 2,500 and 3,000 patrons, and niche businesses, including the Green Boheme vegan restaurant, have thrived, neighborhood leaders said.

As they seek to rebrand the area, neighborhood interests are battling a perception that Del Paso Boulevard is dangerous. North Sacramento consistently has among the city’s highest crime rates, but boosters of the area argue the negative views of the boulevard are misguided.

Still, Sacramento police have responded to more than 20 robberies of businesses and individuals this year along the 1.5-mile stretch that has been the focus of redevelopment efforts, according to department records. That’s a slight uptick over last year, mirroring a citywide trend, records show.

Just last month, six people were shot – one fatally – outside a Halloween-themed party at a dance studio on the boulevard.


“Until we start to balance the (challenges on the street) with more successful businesses and people

committed to coming to the boulevard, we won't be able to completely eliminate those kinds of issues," Warren said.

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