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OKC Central: Stretch of NW 23 has plenty to appeal to Route 66 tourists

Oklahoman business writer Steve Lackmeyer asks if a stretch of NW 23 could see a boost to its efforts at revitalization if it is rebranded as a part of historic Route 66.

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About a dozen years ago, Michael Smith stood virtually alone in promoting revitalization of NW 23 between Classen Boulevard and Broadway. He pushed hard for a streetscape of the corridor and helped promote creation of a design review ordinance.

Smith also pushed an early-day effort at branding the stretch as “Uptown.” A couple of years ago, Smith moved his interior design store, but his legacy lives on with the streetscape and a stretch of trendy restaurants including Tuckers, Big Truck Tacos, Cheever's and Mutt's.

The Uptown sign, once posted in front of the landmark Gold Dome, however, since has disappeared. In its place stands a new street sign installed last fall at the direction of state Sen. David Holt that tells travelers this street was once part of Route 66.

Holt has long sought ways to promote the city's urban core, and was instrumental in moving Shakespeare in the Park from Edmond to the Myriad Gardens and in renaming an obscure Bricktown alleyway “Flaming Lips Alley.”

Like many locals, Holt never thought of NW 23 — or any other stretch of Oklahoma City roadway — as being a part of old Route 66. Nor did he fully appreciate its appeal to tourists until rock legend Paul McCartney stopped at the Skirvin as part of his own Route 66 journey.

Looking back, how could Oklahoma City have ignored its own contributions along Route 66? If the essence of Route 66 is nostalgic commercialism, does it get any better than the Gold Dome, a former bank at NW 23 and Classen, or the nearby Milk Bottle Building? The recently restored neon Tower Theater marquee and a vintage Philips 66 gas station, along NW 23, would seem to make this stretch of Route 66 a must-see for tourists.

And the restaurants, all of which opened in a path blazed by Smith and his peers, all seem custom-made for Route 66 tourism.

Yet in talking with Keith Paul, co-owner of Cheever's and Tucker's, and with Cally Johnson, co-owner of Mutt's and Big Truck Taco's, neither group really considered how this area could be rebranded as an essential stop for Route 66 travelers.

A study released in August by Rutgers University suggests a “low estimate” of annual direct spending by Route 66 tourists in the eight-state corridor totaling \$38 million.

Oklahoma, with the longest stretch of original Route 66 still intact, figures to be big part of that spending, though a state-by-state breakdown was not included in the study.

A few years ago, I traveled Route 66 to track the impact the memory of the old road

was having on businesses and towns along the way. What I saw was amazing. I shared lunch with a group of Norwegians at the Rock Cafe in Stroud. I met a couple from Tokyo who spent a month driving Route 66 — in a Chevrolet. Another couple, from Hawaii, spent \$10,000 to have their motorcycles shipped to the mainland to travel the Mother Road.

Towns all along Route 66 have focused on putting up signs and promoting their place along the old highway.

Tulsans even committed millions toward their branding as part of Vision 2025. Yet Oklahoma City's part of this story remains largely untold.

Holt has done his part. Now the question remains: Will the merchants and property owners along NW 23 truly discover the value of one of their most promising — and underappreciated — assets?



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