

Study suggests more emphasis on retail, housing for Bricktown to prosper

The slow emergence of retail along the Bricktown Canal in Oklahoma City is seen as one of the key steps toward the area not being reduced to a restaurant and bar district, according to a study released Tuesday.

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Published: October 19, 2011

The latest retail offerings popping up in Bricktown likely will not be seen as a threat to Penn Square Mall or other popular shopping areas around town.

After all, the addition of an outlet of Edmond's Signature Books in the Bricktown Marketplace along the Bricktown Canal only occupies a few hundred square feet. And when Guestroom Records opens along the Bricktown Canal next month below UCO's Academy of Contemporary Music, it will occupy 800 square feet — about a third of the size of owner Justin Sowers' music store in northwest Oklahoma City.

“When I visited New York City last year, one of the highlights of the trip was spending a considerable amount of time in Bleecker Street Records in the West Village,” said Chad Huntington, who co-owns the nearby Bricktown Marketplace and Red Dirt Emporium. “Guestroom is exactly that kind of record store, and I think it's a brilliant stroke of luck for everyone concerned that they will be here soon.”

The expanding retail also is seen as the sort of variety needed to overcome the risk that Bricktown be branded as just a restaurant and bar district, said A.J. Kirkpatrick, an assistant city planner. Kirkpatrick spent the last year interviewing bankers, brokers, property owners and merchants in the district in an effort to come up with a plan to promote continued growth and development.

Where is it going?

In a presentation Tuesday to the Oklahoma City Council, Kirkpatrick said property owners interviewed as part of the study are worried about the district's current direction. One owner commented, “there is no commonality of goals among owners right now — it's like ships passing in the night.”

Bankers interviewed, meanwhile, said they were least interested in loaning money for restaurants and bars in the district, and were more interested in helping open housing,

offices and retail. Property owners, meanwhile, gave the reverse order when citing how they wish to develop their properties.

“The problem we've seen in other entertainment districts is if you continue to do bar after bar after bar, you chase away other land uses that are more sustainable,” Kirkpatrick said. “You don't want residential over bars, you don't want retailers next to bars if they're going to have to be cleaning sidewalk every morning.”

Learning on the job

Kirkpatrick said the study shows the city can work with the Bricktown Association and Downtown Oklahoma City Inc. in trying to educate property owners and encourage development of long-vacant space throughout the district.

He said bankers and real estate professionals echoed sentiments voiced by brokers Zach Martin, Andy and David Burnett in a recent article in *The Oklahoman*, saying property owners' lease and sale expectations have often prevented successful development of the district.

“Compared to other parts of downtown, Bricktown has attracted entrepreneurs who made their money in other professions and admittedly are learning development as they go,” Kirkpatrick said.

“This is particularly troublesome as some of the properties in Bricktown represent some of the worst hurdles in terms of development hazards and the age of the buildings.”

But Kirkpatrick said the first generation of Bricktown property owners appear to be transitioning to a new set of owners more willing to try out new approaches. The recent purchase of the Oklahoma Hardware Building along the canal by UCO@ACM, he said, was important toward creating street life during weekdays.

“On any given day there are over 200 students in Bricktown during the day, eight to five, when Bricktown is usually a ghost town,” Kirkpatrick said.

It's that growing enrollment at ACM@UCO that prompted school President Scott Booker to seek out Guestroom Records as a tenant. Booker is also eager to participate in discussions on how to bring more retail into the district that will address the interests of visitors and his own students.

“As tenants come and go, we will always be proactive in looking for tenants that compliment our student body,” Booker said. “I would love to see more retail in Bricktown that cater to college age individuals.”

Chad Huntington, who helped open the Red Dirt Emporium and the Bricktown Marketplace in the nearby Miller-Jackson Building, sees ACM@UCO as a key to helping the district overcome its past struggles at developing long-empty space.

Huntington said his two stores were opened in response to concerns voiced by

passengers of the canal water taxis, which he oversees for owner Bob Bekoff, who also co-owns the stores.

The marketplace, he noted, is the largest locally owned retail floor-plate downtown spanning 6,000 square feet.

Retail obstacles

“I believe that a major obstacle to retail in Bricktown ... has been a lack of smaller retail spaces in Bricktown,” Huntington said. “Local, mom-and-pop style shopkeepers generally can't say grace over 4,500 feet, 6,000 feet, 10,000 feet, yet often those were the only choices, as I think building owners have been hesitant to carve out 500 or 1,200 feet for a small retailer, potentially eliminating an opportunity down the road to lease or develop a large contiguous floor plate.”

Huntington said he agrees with the study's conclusion that the right retail mix must be discovered to ensure future success. According to a survey by the Travel Industry of America Association cited in the Bricktown study, 42 percent of visitors want to buy books or music. With ACM@UCO added into the mix, Huntington believes Guestroom Records is the perfect addition.

“You have students who are working on their own musical foundations, and they will now have a great place to discover new and old music that will influence them in their career,” Huntington said. “But beyond that, I think many travelers look for great record stores when they are visiting a city, especially in an urban area.”



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