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This Week



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News Story

'Welli West' rising

By Roman Zakaluzny, Ottawa Business Journal Staff
Mon, Oct 22, 2007 12:00 AM EST

New BIA, redevelopment help define, gentrify an area tarnished by vice

It has a name, a boundary, a brand new theatre and a vision.

All that's left for the soon-to-be-formalized Wellington Street West BIA is to differentiate itself from its neighbours, say proponents.



Dennis Van Staalduin, Leslie Turcotte and Michel Frojmovic. (Etienne Ranger, special to the OBJ)

"The condos are going up, the chain stores are coming in, the boutique stores are coming in, the coffee shops . . . there's a lot of new people moving into the area, buying up the older houses and renovating them," said Sam Feldberg, owner of Morris Formal Wear, a staple in the urban neighbourhood since the 1920s. "You're talking about an infusion of capital not seen in 25 years."

Mr. Feldberg and others have witnessed more changes in the past three or four years than at any time previously. Boutique stores that earned reputations in areas like the Glebe and Westboro are increasingly turning to "Welli West" for its lower rents but high business potential. And this month's opening of the Irving Greenburg Theatre Centre, home of the relocated Great Canadian Theatre Company (GCTC), is injecting some culture and legitimate evening commerce into the area.

Mr. Feldberg said he's surprised it's taken so long for the revitalization to begin.

"I feel, for whatever reason, it's been neglected for so many years," said the third-generation store owner. "You have the civic hospital, you have Island Park Drive just down the street . . . Let's face it, we're two miles from the Rideau Centre, one mile from Dow's Lake . . . everything's so close."

On Wednesday, council is set to approve the formation of Wellington Street West Business Improvement Area (BIA).

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Eighty-five per cent of businesses within its boundary voted in favour of the BIA, said proponent and local business owner Dennis Van Staalduin.

"The BIA gives us an opportunity to say once and for all, it's Wellington Street West," said Mr. Van Staalduin who, along with Michel Frojmovic, helped spur three distinct communities to

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Reader Poll 10/15/2007

Would your firm consider relocating from Ottawa to Gatineau?

Bien sur, in a heartbeat. The benefits of avoiding Ottawa's traffic jams and saving on Ottawa's rent are reasons enough.

Yes, but only if the corporate assistance programs offered by the municipal, Quebec and federal governments were as good as promised.

No, the language issue would be too difficult for some employees and management, and luring competent workers and clients to that side of the river would be too much effort.

Likely not. There's just too much of a je ne sais quoi.

Other.

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unite. "We share one umbilical chord that ties the whole area together. We want to bring people down to take another look if they haven't been here for awhile."

The BIA mainly follows Wellington, but encompasses businesses as far north as Scott Street, south to Highway 417, west to Island Park Drive and east to the O-Train tracks. All merchants within its borders are required to be members of the dues-paying club. In return, they get a hand in managing infrastructure renewal in the area, including road, water and sewer work.

The BIA incorporates three pre-existing communities that matured at different times into one area: Hintonburg, Wellington Village and Parkdale. The three hope to brand themselves as an area separate from neighbours, said Mr. Van Staalduinen, a point of confusion even for residents.

"We had a store move out recently," he said. "They hung a sign out saying 'Thanks for 25 great years in Westboro.' And they've been here for a quarter century!"

"The challenge is in defining and marketing the area as a place with its own character and value, separate from Westboro, separate from Somerset, separate from Preston . . . people have trouble distinguishing it from the neighbourhoods around it."

However, its very proximity to other successful areas may help Wellington succeed, said one industry analyst.

"The key thing is that it's between two major (existing) nodes: Westboro, which is expanding eastwards and westwards, and the (Tunney's Pasture and Lebreton Flats) area, which is expanding westwards," said Barry Nabatian of Market Research Corp., who has done some research on the area.

"The next area to naturally become gentrified is the Wellington area."

Located within Ottawa's greenbelt, full of older, one- to two-storey buildings and vacant lots, the district is prime for intensification, said Mr. Nabatian. It's just a matter of time before the area starts looking more like its neighbours.

"In 10 years, it will be more or less where Westboro is now."

Westboro has, of course, achieved tremendous growth over the years. Mr. Nabatian first examined Westboro 10 years ago, and found then that if a landlord got \$10 or \$11 a square foot in rent, he or she considered themselves lucky. "Today, if a tenant can get \$30 a square foot, (the tenant) is lucky."

Right now, rent in Wellington is considerably lower, but rising, he said.

"People who own property or businesses there now are definitely happy," he said. "(Rent) is by no means flat, it will continue to increase. In another three or four years, it will become like Glebe – high end but stable."

The GCTC, which moved from its old Gladstone address and with shows running late into the night six nights a week, is already leading to increases in business, local merchants said.

"People coming to a play need to be fed, watered and out to make the 8 o'clock show," said Leslie Turcotte, development director for the theatre. "(Restaurants) should be able to hold on to their original clientele, and make some new ones."

Ms. Turcotte said the theatre could draw up to 14,000 ticketholders to the area in a year,



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"We've already seen restaurants opening up and more walking traffic," she said.

Some businesses from other communities are moving to the strip. Chris Green, owner of Harvest Loaf Bakery on Wellington near Clarendon Avenue, moved his store seven years ago from Westboro.

"Westboro was becoming expensive," he told the OBJ. "(I had) to consider that, but also the fact that (Wellington) was becoming more high profile."

Ditto for Christine Grenville, co-owner of Three Tarts bakery, who likewise moved from the Glebe after her landlord jacked up the rent.

"We got four times the amount of space for about what we would have been paying in (the Glebe)," she said. "As this area becomes more popular, of course the prices go along with that. But for now, it's good."

Mr. Green said he was pleased the BIA is forming, which he said will spur infrastructure development, street beautification and perhaps a street festival.

"We'll have an organization that will act as a conduit between the city and the businesses. Right now, we don't have that direct link."

He hopes the BIA and area landlords will plan well, and keep a mix of businesses.

"I hope people don't get too far ahead of themselves," he said. "What I've seen (in Ottawa) is, when an area gets popular, you suddenly see an influx of restaurants. You have to keep that eclectic range of business that is key to keeping this area vibrant and healthy."

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