

Funky 'Wellington West' looks to carve out a retail identity

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Is it Hintonburg? Mechanicsville? What do you call that zone that stretches from the O-Train to Island Park Drive, anyway?

The businesses in the area want to call it Wellington West, and Ottawa city council recently approved a proposal that is expected to lead to the formation of the new Wellington West Business Improvement Area by early next year.

It is hoped that the new BIA will focus attention, and development, on what could potentially become a nice new shopping street.

I hope the initiative works, because Ottawa desperately needs new shopping streets. Not shopping malls, or power centres, but shopping streets. They add character to the city, and right now we don't have enough of them.

They're not easy to create -- in part, because they arise almost organically, as a result of dozens of individual decisions about business location. But their organic nature is what makes them attractive and gives them life.

If you think about it, there are not too many parts of the city where you can amble down the street in search of that happy mixture of shops, restaurants, services and street life, all within a few city blocks.

There's the ByWard Market, of course, and the Glebe, and Richmond Road west of Island Park. Rideau Street used to be more of a shopping street than it is now, and Bank Street in Centretown is working to become one. But Ottawa doesn't really have the equivalent of Toronto's Queen Street West or King Street East and the city suffers because of it.

But neighbourhoods evolve and right now, Wellington Street West is developing. So is the neighbourhood around it, thanks to the Parkdale Market, the new Irving Greenberg Theatre, and other cultural amenities.

Retail is the next logical step. It is already strong west of Parkdale, but there are a number of hurdles to overcome.

The first is identity.



CREDIT: Rod Macivor, The Ottawa Citizen
Dennis Van Staaldunin, a spokesman for the Wellington West BIA steering committee, says the neighbourhood between the O-Train and Island Park Drive has already established its own identity and cachet.

There was a time -- a long time ago, before the demolition of the residential community in LeBreton Flats -- when the Wellington Street that runs by Parliament Hill connected with the Wellington Street that runs from the O-Train to Island Park.

Not anymore. The street now seems like an extension of Somerset.

It's too bad Wellington West didn't get a new name at some point in the past. Instead, Somerset runs into Wellington West, which turns into Richmond Road. It's all very confusing.

Dennis Van Staalduin, a spokesman for the Wellington West BIA steering committee, says many's the business owner who's discovered that a potential client has been driving back and forth in front of Parliament Hill, looking for a place that is in reality several kilometres further west.

There's also confusion created by the fact that the neighbourhood can be called Mechanicsville or Hintonburg.

It's hoped having a name will help solve that.

Another hurdle is attractiveness.

That, said Mr. Van Staalduin, is being dealt with. He said that the city is expected to start a major renovation project soon along Wellington West that will include widened sidewalks and upgraded street lighting. He added that he expects the widened sidewalks will lead to an increase in pedestrian traffic.

Another challenge is developing the retail potential of the area east of Parkdale.

"What you don't get is an unbroken series of retail establishments that lead people to walk from one store to the next, to the next," said Mr. Van Staalduin.

That, too, is starting to change.

Last month, Carbon Computing opened a store in the old bingo hall at 1065 Wellington West. It's a specialty store that sells hardware, software and services for Apple computers.

The company chose to locate in the area because of its funky appeal.

"The owner of Carbon Computing is from Ottawa and he knows the neighbourhood," said Leo Galioto, a company spokesman. "He finds the Wellington Street location is a lot like their Queen Street East location in Toronto."

He also said the area was appealing because it was close to downtown and had easy access to the Queensway.

The final challenge for any retail street is cachet. In Toronto, Bloor Street is upscale, Queen Street West is bohemian, King Street East is all about design. So what will shoppers find on Wellington West?

Mr. Van Staalduin says the area is all about day-to-day specialty goods and personality. Personality, he said, is created by the idiosyncrasies of dozens of shop owners who together create something unique.

That personality is something Carbon Computing is already starting to feel.

"Wellington West is like a small town," said Mr. Galioto. "The number of people we've had who pop in to say, 'Hello, welcome to the neighbourhood, we're glad you're here' -- you wouldn't get that in a big-box area.

"We prefer the smaller, intimate feeling of this community," he added.

I bet shoppers will, too.

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