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West Dearborn rising

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West Dearborn has emerged as one of metro Detroit's newest thriving entertainment districts because the city developed a long-term development plan years ago and stuck to it, said Chuck DiMaggio, vice president of project development for Bingham Farms-based Burton-Katzman Development Co.

During the past three years, new restaurants, sports bars and clubs such as Crave Lounge, Post Bar, Andiamo Dearborn and Cheli's Chill Bar have opened in west Dearborn, making the area so popular that it's often difficult to find a place to park at night.

"The first thing that (the city) did was they recognized that there was a problem, and they paid attention to it, and they developed a strategy of how to address it," DiMaggio said. "National retailers are starting to pay attention ... and are moving into the area. Their efforts at making this a strong, stable downtown environment are really paying dividends now."

On four separate projects, the city promoted the development of west Dearborn by purchasing land, setting development goals and then asking developers to submit proposals.

Burton-Katzman's West Village commons, on Michigan Avenue where a Jacobson's department store once stood, is the latest of those projects.

There, Burton-Katzman plans to open the first phase of the project in December, which will include two two-story buildings. Combined, there will be about 35,000 square feet of retail and restaurants on the first floor and 39,000 square feet of offices on the second floor.

Tenants of West Village Commons are to include Moe's Southwest Grill, Caribou Coffee, Cold Stone Creamery, Au Bon Pain, La Cigar and Rocky Mountain Chocolate.

Burton-Katzman also broke ground recently on a 48-unit condominium project scheduled for completion by next summer. A third phase, scheduled to begin next year, may include either a hotel or more condominiums.

Dearborn's decision to encourage the development of condominiums also was smart, said Erik Tungate, community and economic development director for the city of Hamtramck.

"People shop where they live," Tungate said.

West Village Commons also is supported by two 330-space parking decks built by the city for about \$12 million.

DiMaggio said he had hoped to attract specialty clothing retailers to the development but has been unable to do so thus far. Plus, early talks with Barnes & Noble fell through when the retailer opted for another development.

The retail portion of West Village Commons isn't fully leased yet, DiMaggio said, and Burton-Katzman is in negotiations with about six more potential tenants.

West Dearborn's emergence as a restaurant and entertainment district was a slow and sometimes arduous journey, and the BurtonKatzman project is no exception.

And some in Dearborn, such as longtime Dearborn City Councilman Doug Thomas, argue that while restaurants have arrived in west Dearborn the area has failed to attract much retail.

"We have very little retail," Thomas said. "We are now becoming a restaurant town."

The former Jacobson's department store closed in March of 1997 and was bought for \$2.5 million in 1999 by the West Dearborn Downtown Development Authority.

The city then asked for proposals for developers and eventually settled on DJ. Maltese Co. Inc. after a prolonged political battle that saw Dearborn City Council backing Maltese and Dearborn Mayor Michael Guido backing Burton-Katzman. But then Maltese's project didn't work out, and Burton-Katzman was hired in April 2003, DiMaggio said.

An earlier project in west Dearborn called "superblock" languished for the better part of a decade before the city finally sold it to a development group called New Towne Development Co. that built about 75 condominiums and 27,000 square feet of retail space in 1997.

And yet that development, now called Dearborn Village, was one of the catalysts for additional development in west Dearborn, said Michelle DaRos, acting director of economic and community development.

"It's been a very long process, in some respects, but some things seem to have happened overnight," DaRos said.

Some new venues in west Dearborn haven't survived. Tenny Street Roadhouse, a large blues and rock venue with a restaurant that featured Cajun fare, opened in June 2003 and was praised for both its food and music until the venue closed in September.

DaRos says Dearborn is at about the halfway point with its effort to spur development in west Dearborn and said the construction of two more parking garages will help spur additional development.

Dearborn has solicited proposals for the redevelopment of two parking lots in west Dearborn and is reviewing them, DaRos said.

One parking lot is east of Military Street, west of Howard Street and south of Garrison Street, while the second is south of West Village Drive, east of Monroe Street, west of Mason Street and north of the railroad tracks.

DaRos is hopeful that west Dearborn will attract more development without direct involvement by the city once those projects are under way.

"We would prefer if the private market just went that way on its own. But in certain economic times, the market will only reuse a property for a purpose that is not really the best for the downtown," DaRos said. "That's when the city should step forward. ... Only by ownership can we make sure that the end use is appropriate."

Councilman Thomas has tried, unsuccessfully, to block the city's plan to begin charging for parking at the two West Village Commons parking garages in December.

Parking, Thomas said, ought to be free and the debt the city has incurred for the parking garages should be paid through special assessments on local businesses. Thomas also argues that comparisons of west Dearborn to Royal Oak are overblown.

"But we do have something they don't have, and that's free parking," Thomas said. "But now we've lost that advantage."

Dan Kiernan, co-owner, vice president and general manager of Kiernan's Steak House on Michigan Avenue, has had a front-row seat to the changing face of west Dearborn since he began working at his father's restaurant in the early 1970s.

Kiernan said his restaurant has both benefited from and been hurt by the influx of other businesses.

"Our dinner business is better than it has ever been," Kiernan said. "But our lunch business is probably 30 percent of what it was 20 years ago."

Kiernan said the proliferation of nearby lunch choices and a challenging parking situation as well as society's shift away from longer lunch hours all have contributed to a diminished lunch business.

But in 2003, Kiernan's opened Silky's Music & Martini Cafe, which regularly hosts bands and singers.

Fifteen years ago, Kiernan said, he would have had a much harder time attracting customers to Silky's.

"It would have been possible, but it would have taken a lot more promotion of what we were doing, because we would have been basically the only ones doing it on this end of town," Kiernan said.