

Business Record

Revitalizing Dogtown

Efforts are underway to reacquaint Des Moines-area residents with the business district east of Drake University.

BY [KATHY A. BOLTEN](#), Senior Staff Writer

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On the surface, the goal sounds daunting: Transform a commercial area surrounding Drake University into an entertainment district that attracts not only people who live in Greater Des Moines but also visitors to the city.

“When someone comes to Des Moines, they think, ‘Hey, let’s go to Valley Junction’ or ‘Let’s go to the East Village,’ ” said Darrell Sarmiento, executive director of the Des Moines West Side Chamber of Commerce. “We want them to also start thinking, ‘Let’s go to Dogtown for lunch and look at the shops.’ ”

Dogtown is the moniker for the commercial area east of Drake University – its mascot is a bulldog – along University Avenue between 23rd and 25th streets.

Over the years, the commercial district has been home to a diverse collection of businesses, many of which catered to Drake students. Today, however, many of the buildings along the corridor are outdated and in need of major renovations. Businesses have closed and the corridor’s previous eclectic personality has faded.

The corridor, according to a recent city report, has “a surprisingly weak identity.”

Efforts are underway to reinvigorate the area by providing financial incentives to upgrade buildings, which in turn will attract new businesses to the area. The West Side Chamber, in the coming months, is developing a marketing campaign that will reacquaint Des Moines-area residents and visitors with Dogtown.

“We want Dogtown to be known as a vibrant dining, business, retail and entertainment district,” Sarmiento said. “The pieces are there to make that happen.”



Jeff Bruning of Full Court Press at the bar of the new Lucky Horse Beer and Burgers at 24th and University



Artist rendition of the remodeled Varsity Cinema to be owned and operated by the Des Moines Film Society

Last September, a new live music and arts venue called xBk opened at 1159 24th St. In May, a nonprofit arts group announced plans to buy and reopen the now-closed Varsity Theater at 1207 25th St. Construction is expected to be completed by fall on a 124-room Home2 Suites hotel and accompanying restaurant at 26th Street and University Avenue. The company building the hotel, Nelson Construction & Development, plans to start construction this summer on a building that will include apartments and ground-level commercial space. The building will be just east of the hotel.

In addition, Lucky Horse Beer and Burgers (*Now Open!*) is on the first floor of a building being restored at 2331 University Ave. And in 2021, construction is expected to begin on the first phase of an ambitious \$63 million project that will

include apartments, townhouses, commercial space and a parking garage. The development is planned for an area bounded by 24th and 25th streets and Forest and University avenues.

"This is a place to put on the map," said Jeff Bruning, president of Full Court Press, the restaurant group behind Lucky Horse Beer and Burgers. "It's where East Village was 10 years ago."

"A lot of people aren't familiar with the term 'Dogtown' right now, but I think once a lot of these projects start getting completed, 'Dogtown' will be familiar to everyone."

Years ago, Drake University began buying property around its campus at 25th and University as a way to control development. In 2016, the university began taking steps to redevelop the property beginning on the south side of University at 26th Street.

University officials asked developers to submit proposals for the 2.7 acres that had had surface parking lots and houses Drake rented to students. Nelson Construction's proposal for a hotel, restaurant, retail and apartments was selected. *(UPDATE: New Home2 Suite Hotel to Open in the Fall of 2020!)*

Last summer, the university announced it was working with Cedar Falls-based Merge Urban Development to redevelop a two-block area east of campus that officials say will add an additional boost to the vibrancy of the area.

Work on the project, which includes up to 300 new apartments, townhouses, and ground-level commercial space, was expected to begin this summer. Construction is now expected to begin on the project's first phase next spring, said Marty Martin, Drake's president.

"Our vision for these properties is to put them to bigger and better uses that will bring vibrancy to the area, and with that, more people," Martin said. "This [Merge] project will supercharge that."

A portion of the Drake neighborhood is among four pilot areas the city of Des Moines has targeted to revitalize by razing dilapidated structures and providing money to make improvements to houses and commercial buildings.

A streetscape project along University Avenue between 25th and 31st streets is part of the revitalization efforts. So are plans to turn a triangle-shaped piece of city-owned land in the 2400 block of Cottage Grove into a garden and entry point into the Drake neighborhood. The garden will include porch swings and a neighborhood entrance sign.

The improvements to streets, sidewalks and parks will provide a feel of newness to the neighborhood and likely spur homeowners and commercial property owners to upgrade their properties, said Amber Lynch, executive director of Invest DSM Inc., a nonprofit corporation overseeing revitalization efforts in targeted Des Moines neighborhoods.

"The stronger the residential component is, the stronger the business district will be," Lynch said. "All of these things work together."

Bruning, who is opening the new beer and burger restaurant on University Avenue and who lives in the neighborhood, said the new investment in the area gave him confidence to open a new business in the Dogtown district.

"I really think, in a few years, this will be a destination place that people want to come and spend time in," he said.

Sarmento, the West Side Chamber executive director, said the marketing campaign that will likely launch in 2021 will help re-familiarize area residents with Dogtown specifically and the Drake neighborhood in general.

"Everything that's going on now is helping to create a healthy and growing business district," he said.