

As real estate values in Oak Lawn continue to escalate, more business people are starting to look south

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When Darren Humphrey and Gus Trevino opened Nodding Dog Coffee Co. in the Bishop Arts District in 2004, they had high hopes for a coffee shop catering to caffeine junkies and live music fans alike. But even such eager entrepreneurs couldn't have predicted the renaissance in retail and dining the district is experiencing.

"It's growing so rapidly," says Humphrey. "We're kind of amazed."

Leading the charge are gay and lesbian business owners who view the quaint North Oak Cliff neighborhood as a bastion of historic charm in a Dallas obsessed with tearing down the old to build the new. The area's early 20th century architecture is protected under a conservation district that promises to retain the allure.

"When we first came here two years ago, there were about five or six gay- and lesbian-owned businesses, now there are 21 in the district," says Humphrey.

That's about 70 percent of all businesses in Bishop Arts. He says as Oak Lawn grows increasingly crowded residentially and commercially, more gays and lesbians than ever before are moving to North Oak Cliff. That in turn is creating new demand for the businesses of Bishop Arts.

A number of new storefronts have opened in the district recently, with more on the way. Swank restaurant and lounge Cosmo Rouge set up shop late last year. Meanwhile Café Madrid — already an established restaurant in the Knox-Henderson area — will open a second location in the district this summer, and quirky soda shop The Soda Gallery is set to debut soon.

Another recent arrival in the district is longtime Oak Lawn hamburger joint Hunky's. Owner Rick Barton began looking at properties in Oak Cliff four years ago, and though he considered spaces in various parts of town, he was ultimately drawn to the offbeat appeal of Bishop Arts.

"I feel like this is the hot spot in Oak Cliff, and I think it will always be a hot spot because of the conservation district designation," he says.

When Barton opened the original Hunky's in Oak Lawn in 1985, the Cedar Springs corridor was still a funky, undeveloped area — the bohemian center of Dallas. He sees that same character in Oak Cliff today.

"I'm more excited about this than I could be about Plano or Richardson," Barton said.

And so are his customers. Since the new store opened, Barton says, he's served innumerable customers who used to dine at the Oak Lawn location and now live in Oak Cliff.

Meanwhile in Oak Lawn, a growing number of older homes and retail complexes face the wrecking ball as developers make room for new high-end condos and other projects.

Rumors abound about big corporations' plans to buy out businesses along the Cedar Springs corridor to create a West Village-style development with ground floor retail and upper-level condos. That has business owners like Barton concerned.

"I'm nervous about the possibility of Cedar Springs being taken over... becoming just another extension of Uptown," Barton said.

On the right track

When the Bishop Arts conservation district was enlarged several years ago, it allowed newly absorbed properties to house businesses with roughly half their previously required parking spaces. That spelled new opportunities for entrepreneurs.

Barton and his partner, Michael Amonett, purchased the building at the corner of Eighth Street and Bishop Avenue, turning a former restaurant into Hunky's, opening Alchemy salon and renting out the third storefront to a pet boutique — a combination of businesses



Nodding Dog Coffee Co. owners Darren Humphrey and Gus Trevino have seen the number of gay-owned businesses in the Bishop Arts District quadruple in two years. They plan to apply for an alcohol permit this summer and renovate to add a stage for live music at night.

that would have required more parking than what is available under the old codes.

Ten years after opening his interiors boutique Bishop Street Market, Michael Harrity says he's watched plenty of storefronts come and go. One of the main reasons he cites for the turnover is the lack of business experience among most entrepreneurs here.

But with the streetscape improvements completed in recent years, he says more and more people from beyond Oak Cliff are drawn to the district.

"Things are on the right track and I think we're seeing more stability in the businesses," Harrity says.

And that means the footprint will expand.

This summer, a section of Davis Street from Zang to Cedar Hill will get spiffed up with new sidewalks, better lighting and a few benches. The goal: make the street more attractive to pedestrian traffic which in turn will draw more retail business to the busier boulevard.

Still, retail isn't the only thriving business category in Bishop Arts.

Real estate developer David Spence, who owns a number of properties in Bishop Arts, says most of the buildings taken up by the expansion of the district are former homes not suited for retail. Instead, those are drawing businesses in the design and decorative arts industry.

Spence says a growing portion of his tenant base is comprised of architects, Web designers and other creative types.

Can the place handle its liquor?

As Bishop Arts grows, so, too, will residential development in North Oak Cliff, says Spence. Though the area has traditionally resisted multi-unit residential projects, many residents and officials now recognize the benefits upscale town homes and condos will bring, such as an increased tax base.

Developer Perry Homes already has several projects on the drawing board for the area, and others are reportedly looking at potential locations.

"Residential is going to pop around here, no doubt about it," Spence says.

"But you won't see the Oak Lawn-ification of Oak Cliff. Wholesale gentrification of this area is not in the cards."

But at least one other business owner thinks the Oak Cliff district is another Oak Lawn waiting to happen.

"It will be the next Cedar Springs, I have no doubt in my mind," says Humphrey, who adds he welcomes that type of change.

Though the area is zoned dry, individual businesses can apply for alcohol permits as "private clubs," provided a majority of their revenue does not come from liquor sales. This summer Nodding Dog will apply for an alcohol permit and carry out a complete interior overhaul that will add a stage for live music and other amenities.

Humphrey says he knows of several bar owners from Cedar Springs who have also expressed interest in coming to Bishop Arts. The demand is there, he says.

"A lot of people who live here say they want to be able to hang out and have a drink, but they don't want to have to go to Cedar Springs to do it," Humphrey says.

He suspects it's only a matter of time before the district becomes a nightlife haven, he added.

But does that move counter to other business owners' goal to maintain the cultural integrity of the district?

"I don't think so," Humphrey says. "I think all of us, as we revitalize this area, want to keep it as close to its original integrity as possible. It's walking a line, but I think we can do it right."

Harrity says if several existing businesses choose to serve alcohol under the current guidelines, the neighborhood can handle it. But he says new players coming onto the scene slinging drinks late into the night isn't wise for Bishop Arts.

"I think you would hear plenty of complaints, the people wouldn't stand for it," Harrity says.

What remains clear, however, is that Dallas is reaping the benefits of its investment in Bishop Arts. District 3 City Councilman Ed Oakley says the money spent on improving a district where rents are still reasonable for small entrepreneurs has created a vibrant microcosm of development that's likely to expand.

"I think we could see more businesses east and west on Davis and on Bishop going towards [Methodist] hospital," he says. "It's just beginning."

Further strengthening North Oak Cliff will be the much anticipated \$1.5 billion Trinity River Project linking downtown with south and west Dallas through bridges, recreation and other developments. Oakley says the project will ignite development in areas of Dallas that

have been underutilized, changing the way people think about south Dallas and Oak Cliff.

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