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In search of urban retail

Eleni Chamis Staff Reporter

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Armed with a camera and a map, Darrel Rippeteau and Sharon Brown are combing the District in search of viable retail spots.

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All over the city, they are finding the same story: An abundance of housing, much of it occupied and well-maintained. But no grocery store. No clothing store. Certainly no hardware, toy or book stores.

For a few months now, Rippeteau, head of District-based Rippeteau Architects, and Brown, who works with Anacostia Management, have been taking informal tours of the city.

"If anyone told me five years ago that I'd be driving around Southeast identifying retail opportunities, I'd tell them they were out of their mind," Brown says as they pass a retail strip along Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue. "No way.

"With shops, art galleries, bars, restaurants -- this could be Columbia Road or Capitol Hill. It has the same feel."

The city will use their information to market itself to retailers, especially at

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the upcoming International Council of Shopping Centers convention in Las Vegas.

Rippeteau and Brown's effort is just one of many under way to revitalize the city's core, including:

- The District is working through community development committees and neighborhood associations to plan revitalizations of retail areas. Retail zoning laws have been relaxed, resulting in fewer vacancies in office buildings.
- The D.C. Building Industry Association's Retail Committee, which counts Rippeteau and Brown as members, is documenting the state of the city's neighborhoods and whether the surrounding retail matches up.
- Business improvement districts are getting involved. The Downtown D.C. BID, for example, has hired a retail consultant to determine a "state of its market" study.
- Residents have begun to take the movement into their own hands, starting grass-roots efforts to bring more retail to their neighborhoods. The best-known example is Fresh Fields on P Street NW.

Cha-ching!

Since the grocery chain moved in, P Street is seeing a resurgence of retail, especially from national names such as Caribou Coffee, Subway and Blockbuster. Health clubs, restaurants and real estate firms have shown interest in space there.

"Now that Fresh Fields is here, cash registers are ringing all day long and retailers are taking note," says Jim Abdo of Abdo Development.

"For 20 years, D.C. has been categorized as a high-crime city -- [people thought] nobody lived here and the people who did didn't have much disposable income," says Michael Stevens, president of the D.C. Marketing Center. "But we have working-class and moderate-income class and also very high income neighborhoods."

Since the 1970s, the suburbs were built with retail -- in enclosed malls and big-box centers -- to the neglect of urban cores throughout the country. Today, people are moving back into cities, forcing developers and retailers to take a second look.

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"When you leave neighborhoods alone for 30 years, some of them in depressed areas, they get run down," says Len Harris, a retail broker with Transwestern. "Now they're getting cleaned up. Some will be gentrified; others will stay ethnic. But they all have a right to be better."

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Guiding retail

Indeed, some are just opening their eyes to see the degree of neglect in some District neighborhoods: the unmet retail demand, the levels of disposable income and the increasing number of residents who are becoming homeowners.

U Street businesses and residents knew that battle well. But now, U Street NW -- which has struggled since being shattered by the 1968 riots -- has new retail under construction, housing that's opened in the last six months and six new high-tech companies.

In some cases, new retailers are coming to areas that already have long-term viable businesses. Along Georgia Avenue, Blue Nile Trading Co. has been in the same spot for 25 years.

"They've survived," says Brenda Williams, who owns the Blue Nile Bookstore. "You can't discount that."

'A very diverse market'

When Stuart Bennett was looking for a place to open his business, the Language Doctors, he settled on 500 H St. NE. He bought the 3,000-square-foot building for \$185,000 and spent \$100,000 renovating it. Joining him in the building are two information technology firms and a coffee shop.

Last summer, community groups and residents in D.C.'s Takoma neighborhood started talking about adding housing, re-evaluating the commercial area and changing traffic patterns. The neighborhood has been gentrified and now sees baby boomers and younger couples moving in.

"There would be more retailers willing to locate in the area if they see more people willing to purchase," says Cecily Patterson, an ANC commissioner for Ward 4B-02. "We could use a bike store, pet stores, baby stores, a bakery, a coffee shop, a bookstore."

"They've got a market over there and a very diverse market."

Michael Beyard, a senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute, says urban areas have the infrastructure, public transit and sense of



community the suburbs don't.

"In suburban areas, there's no public place to associate with other people except regional shopping malls, and they themselves are losing their appeal," he says.

Butch Hopkins, president of the Anacostia Economic Development Corp., says the city can do better: "With the developments created in the suburbs, they almost create an urban setting in their retail developments. We've got an urban setting already in the city. Let's make use of that."

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