

Developer turning warehouse into theater on N. Broad

By: Robin Shannon, Reporter November 11, 2014 0

A local developer has chosen to build a movie theater in the heart of an inactive stretch along North Broad Street, hoping to capitalize on larger projects nearby.

His project is part of a growing bullish sentiment along the Mid-City corridor, where real estate activity is branching out from a major development in the heart of the neighborhood.

With University Medical Center and the Veterans Affairs hospital nearing completion within the next 12 to 18 months, those working to invigorate Broad Street over the past two years say the time is right for resurgence.

"The neighborhood didn't have a lot going for it before (Hurricane Katrina), and it was hit hard in the aftermath of the storm," said Jeff Schwartz, executive director of Broad Community Connections, the group behind the \$20 million ReFresh Project at North Broad and Bienville Street inside a former supermarket space. "It took a while to sort out the bigger picture items like the hospitals and the housing developments. I think people have been waiting and now things are falling into place."

Brian Knighten is out to give people another reason to visit the neighborhood. The New Orleans native has started renovations on a vacant 1920s era warehouse at 636 N. Broad St. that will house a four-screen movie theater for independent and art house films.

The theater project is a first for Knighten, who currently works in residential real estate as an agent for Keller Williams. The son of a contractor, he also spent time promoting and distributing Latin American films in North America while working in the Latin American Resource Center and the Stone Center at Tulane University.

Knighten had been seeking a building permit for his project for about a year when he reached a lease deal at 636 N. Broad St. The right combination of economic factors, including a generous lease agreement with the building owner, drew him to the Spanish colonial revival building. Knighten's renovation project is about 30 percent complete and should be finished by February, he said.

Public records show Jerome Fertel, son of late Ruth's Chris Steakhouse founder Ruth Fertel, is the owner of the building, which was previously the site of a bingo hall, a fish house and the heating and plumbing company Sciamera and Massino, whose name still adorns the façade.

"I could have put it in any corrugated warehouse in the city, but this building fits nicely with the art house feel I'm trying to capture," Knighten said. "This is just one more attraction to get people to check out the comeback of Broad Street."

The theater will be within a stone's throw of the \$9.1 million Lafitte Greenway linear park the city is currently developing. Liz McCartney, co-founder of the nonprofit recovery group St. Bernard Project, said the greenway's intersection at Broad could serve as a trailhead for the park. Her group is planning a development at Broad and St. Peter Street — two blocks away from the greenway.

"...This will be the one spot with the most retail activity," McCartney said. "Pedestrian traffic is something that is really lacking for Broad."

Schwartz expects the greenway to create a need for more neighborhood stores, restaurants, bars and other amenities.

"There is an opportunity for someone to create a high density two- or four-story mixed use development," he said. "The corridor is already zoned for that purpose, and it is on the busiest bus line in the city."

Like Schwartz, Knighten acknowledges development along the Broad corridor has been a bit slower than in other areas of the city. He said the width of the six-lane street and its length has made it a bit of a challenge.

"It's long, wide and cuts through several neighborhoods," Knighten said. "Unlike corridors like O.C. Haley Boulevard and Freret Street, it doesn't have just one (city) council person to represent it. It has taken a lot of collaboration and a lot of time to get going. The surrounding community is vibrant, and the residential market is really starting to take off now."

The ReFresh Project opened earlier this year and includes a Whole Foods supermarket as its lead anchor. Schwartz said the location set up nicely in that it has brought a fresh food retailer to an area he described as a "food desert."



Brian Knighten plans to take a commercial building at 636 N. Broad St. and convert it into an art house movie theater. (Ashley Merlin)

"Some of it was happenstance, right place at the right time," he said. "But part of the reason it was such a good fit was the large parcel size. There are other opportunities like this along Broad for catalytic scale development."

Schwartz said Broad likely sees some of the highest traffic volume in the city, but despite that high visibility there hasn't always been much to bring people into the neighborhood.

"It's never been a problem getting people to come through the corridor," Schwartz said. "The trick is giving people a reason to stop and look around." •

To sign up for free CityBusiness Daily Updates, click [here](#).

Tagged with:

BRIAN KNIGHTEN

BROAD COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

BROAD STREET

JEFF SCHWARTZ

JIZ MCCARTNEY

REFRESH PROJECT

ST. BERNARD PROJECT

WHOLE FOODS

