

Tennyson Lowell Loop **Berkeley Merchants Begin to Think Bigger**

By Ed Mickens

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BERKELEY/REGIS – More than two dozen local business owners gathered in mid-January on Tennyson Street to get to know each other, share concerns, and figure out ways to take charge of their collective future. It was the second meeting of the not-yet official Berkeley District Merchants Association, and the vibe was good.

“The merchants are hungry for connection,” says Dianne Fresquez, owner of For Heaven’s Sake bookstore and healing center, who organized and hosted the get-together. “We recognize the need to not only sustain ourselves, but to attract new business and new businesses” to the area.

An earlier, first-attempt meeting quickly sorted out the scale of the vision the participants wanted to employ. “Originally, there was some disagreement about how we defined ourselves. Some wanted to limit ourselves only to Tennyson Street. Some were interested only in focusing on an arts district. Some of those people left and didn’t come back.” What energized the core of the group was to think big. Explains Fresquez: “What is our mission? To include, not exclude.”

Indeed the geographic boundaries adopted by the group are ambitious. Unlike other merchant groups that adhere to tight definitions of two or four linear blocks or so, the Berkeley District Merchants’ Association is aiming for a large-scale, comprehensive approach: the corridors of Tennyson and Lowell Streets, from 52nd Avenue to 35th Avenue (or just to the edge of Highland Square district). That’s nearly two miles just in length, but they also want to include businesses between the two commercial streets, especially on the cross avenues of 38th, 44th, and 52nd or 50th.

“Here, let me show you,” says Fresquez, picking up a pad of paper. She draws two parallel lines, representing Tennyson and Lowell, then freehands a sinuous curve between them, up then down, until looks like an infinity symbol with three loops instead of two. No, better yet: like a double-helix strand of DNA.

“The Tenn-Lowell-Loop” she proclaims with a laugh, handing me the sketch.

This is clearly not going to be your traditional neighborhood business association. But, then again, this is a neighborhood that enjoys its distinctiveness.

“There are so many new communities, like BelMar, that want to be us,” Fresquez points out. “But we’re the real thing.” That is, a classic, walkable neighborhood of small stores intermingled with apartments and homes. You can thank the streetcars of a century ago—which rolled out of downtown, then up Tennyson and down Lowell—with setting

up that pattern, clusters of shops every few intersections. And you can thank the tenacity of merchants and neighbors for holding much of that pattern intact, even after the streetcar tracks were dismantled and King Auto promised a better world of shopping malls and cul de sacs. Fortunately, some never bought into that idea, and kept alive—sometimes, just barely—an option for a new generation with more urban tastes in community.

Denver has other examples of old commercial districts rediscovered. Of course, there's LoDo—but one per city is probably enough. As neighborhood centers, “Old Gaylord” and South Pearl Street come to mind, and these are models Berkeley merchants tend to cite. But Berkeley has its own identity, edgier—but not too much—both artsy and comfortable, in a left-of-center kind of way.

Tennyson Street, arguably the Main Street of Berkeley, itself has a kaleidoscope of identities. It's an official Cultural Arts District, with its galleries and lively First Fridays and the remarkable Oriental Theatre. It's a destination shopping area for the home improvement set: Tennyson Hardware draws much of its business from its tool line, even from out of state; Lapis Gallery has a regional reputation for its custom cabinetry. Tennyson is home to a growing number of good-enough-to-be-destination restaurants, plus the homier, neighborhood variety. And the street still hosts much of the needs of everyday life, from coffee and haircuts to laundry and lotto, along with specialty shops with some of the niceties: yoga, bikes, fine wine, collectibles and hand-made tamales.

Still, while Tennyson has the name, nearly all the above, and more, makes a home nearby in the smaller shopping areas of 50th and Lowell, 44th and Lowell, along 38th Avenue, even 52nd and Tennyson. Part of the wisdom of the emerging merchants group may be an appreciation that all of these locations and businesses are pieces of a whole, and that stitching them together with cooperation, better communication, joint marketing and clever events makes that whole even stronger.

One of the remarkable things about the lively commercial scene in Berkeley is that it's all come about without big boxes and mega-chains (well, aside from the Safeway at 44th and Lowell). If the hullabaloo a few years ago over the WalMart Neighborhood Market was an indicator, the neighbors want to keep it that way. But even with the happy arrival of Sunflower Market and 24-Hour Fitness along 38th (and yes, there's even a Starbucks tucked into there), the commercial areas of Berkeley lack an “anchor” in shopping center sense. Or is that thinking too corporate, too suburban? Isn't the anchor the neighborhood itself? Brand Berkeley?

At the third meeting last week of the Berkeley District Merchants Association, at Studio 52 at the northern outpost of 52nd and Tennyson, there was caution expressed about creating a formal structure for the organization—just yet. These are the feisty, independent business owners with their everyday livelihood on the line. They speak of local change—Simple Foods is gone; Mob Cyclery is moving to larger quarters on Colfax; what's going into the new building?—and wonder how each will affect them.

They can see how things stitch together. If you, neighbors, can see it, too, go talk to your neighborhood business about it. And, duh, buy something.