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Tennyson Street Denver: Tennyson Looks Forward

When Denver voters approved the public works bonds last November, they also approved \$2.5 million in improvements for Tennyson's commercial district, contingent upon the creation of a maintenance district to levy a tax for upkeep of those improvements. For City Councilman Rick Garcia, getting the funding for Tennyson was a battle. At various points in the process of identifying projects for the bond issue, money was in, then out, and then restored.

The improvements are viewed as key to the health of neighborhood business districts; 32nd Avenue at Lowell has long had such a maintenance district to support lighting, snow removal, street trees and the like.

Garcia recently convened a meeting of property owners, and he terms the support for the district as definitive. A petition will be circulated, and if owners of 35% of the area's property value sign, then a district will be created, and the \$2.5 million will be available for spending. Garcia says there will be broad participation in the design of the project. One possibility involves raising the sidewalk in front of Chavez Park at 41st and Tennyson, and adding head-in parking along the park. The additional parking would be a boon for Tennyson, which currently has a parking nightmare at peak hours. The maintenance district would be overseen by a board of property owners and businesses, to be appointed by the Mayor.

New Business Association

After the lack of success of several Tennyson Merchant Associations in recent years, merchants on Tennyson Street and at the boutique shopping district at 50th and Lowell are coming back together and organizing a new venture. Bringing together merchants from as far south as 35th and Tennyson, and as far north as 52nd Avenue, and not confined to just Tennyson Street, the group seeks to pool marketing resources and form one voice, to more effectively reach out to the community and advocate for the business interests of merchants across the Berkeley area.

Previous efforts have not been sustained for a variety of reasons. The original association, that tied together art galleries on the Tennyson Strip and was instrumental in organizing the area's now famous First Friday Art Walk, moved along steadily for several years, and local merchants submitted dues to support combined advertising of the street's event. After suspicion that those dues weren't being spent transparently, advertising support petered out, merchants lost faith in the group, and it ceased being effective and effectively dissolved. Other efforts to unite retailers, including Zelda's and Simple Foods, both now gone, weren't sustainable. But surviving that effort was a retailer-supported website, TennysonSt.com, which offers a guide to the area and receives tens of thousands of visitors yearly.

Another attempt was made just last year, and new merchants on the street - including retailers, cafes, gallery owners and media - brought new interest and life to the idea. After holding several meetings, these members formed a loose organization and succeeding in launching a few successful marketing ventures - including posters and some small combined marketing materials. Without a strong organizational structure, however, members of the group divided their efforts on separate ventures - a website for the arts community and a retail campaign. While not truly divided, cross-purposes and a lack of clear focus effectively dissolved the association before it truly got started.

Many of these same merchants remained committed to working together, however, and this new attempt brings new vision and focus to an effort that most recognize as being really important. "We've got to work together," says Dianne Fresquez, owner of For Heaven's Sake. She enlisted the help of her marketing director to formulate some organizational materials and pound the pavement - and on a blustery night early in January, filled the meeting room at the back of her store with merchants, gallery owners, media and others committed to breathing life back into the effort. Now the Association is coming together as the Berkeley District Merchants Association, and has formed a Steering Committee that will spearhead the creation of some referral marketing materials, a merchant directory, a partnership with the Berkeley-Regis United Neighborhoods, and an organizational structure that will allow the Association to work despite the sometimes differing interests of its membership base. TennysonSt.com remains committed to supporting area merchants.