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The rail district

by Leslie Shepard-Owsley

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Birmingham's ambitious plans over the last decade have begun the transformation of the city's Rail District, a formerly industrial neighborhood, into a trendy urban business and residential area. The area, which had featured a functioning railway station until the 1980s, has evolved into an eclectic community, with city officials now looking at its future as a hub for intermodal transit.

The triangular-shaped Rail District is bounded by Maple Road to the north, Eton Road to the west, Lincoln to the south, and the Canadian National Railroad tracks to the east.

While steeped in history, the Rail District didn't always live up to its current moniker. By the 1840s, railroad companies were pushing into Michigan. They were welcomed by some, since they moved people and goods efficiently and quickly. Others rued the rails, seeing them as an obstruction cutting through the center of their evolving communities.

John Hamilton, one of Birmingham's earliest denizens and businessmen, viewed the railroad as a detriment to his business. He wrangled and fought the Detroit Pontiac Railroad until an agreement was forged to move the rails eastward, bypassing around the community.

"It was a highly politicized march," said William McElhone, executive director of the Birmingham Historical Museum & Park. "Hamilton and other business owners and residents didn't want the train running through the middle of town. They didn't mind it east of town, but due to this political movement, it held up the railroad coming into town for about six years."

The tracks were shifted a half-mile east of town, where they remained until the 1920s. It was then that a train station was constructed at the northwest corner of Hunter Boulevard — now known as Woodward Avenue — and East Maple Road, across the street from where a Kroger store stands today.

With the emergence of the automobile and growth in the community, the city planned an expansion of Hunter Boulevard. A group of influential men formed a coalition called the "Wider Woodward Avenue Association," and through their efforts, the State Highway Commission widened and improved Woodward Avenue between Detroit and Pontiac.

The railroad tracks were moved further east so Woodward could be expanded. It took 10 years to acquire the land rights of way and complete construction.

"It meant moving and creating a super highway in the downtown, and they needed to create a bypass for the downtown to keep traffic moving," McElhone said. "It cleared the decks for Hunter Boulevard to be built."

In 1931, the Grand Trunk Western Railroad held its highly-anticipated grand opening. Hordes of celebrants participated in the all-day extravaganza, heralding the new commuter rail service and a \$125,000 train station located at Eton and Villa.

Eventually, several trains ran daily out of what became known as the Eton Street Station. Over time, the two highest-density routes were ridden by blue-collar workers who were employed by either Chrysler or Ford. One route stopped in Highland Park; the other behind Detroit's Renaissance Center.

"We would hop on the train downtown when I worked for Ford and it would drop us at the Renaissance Center," said Historical Society Treasurer Andy Huebner. "It was a wonderful routine. We would read the paper, converse with our neighbors, or take a nap. It was a wonderful convenience, and ran on time, even when it snowed. It all stopped in the mid-1980s, and was replaced by SEMTA (the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority) and SMART (the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation)."

The novelty of commuter rail service wore off by the 1980s, in large part due to the ease of commuting by car; and the train station subsequently closed its doors. SEMTA allowed its lease with the railroad to expire and the depot on Eton was vacated.

The railroad tracks are now owned by Canadian National, while the intercity passenger trains operating on the tracks are owned by Amtrak.

"Today it's a platform like any bus stop, in enclosed glass," McElhone said. "You can't buy tickets there — you board the train, and like in older days, the conductor collects your money and gives you a ticket on the spot."

The trains now moving through town stop in densely populated areas such as Royal Oak, Dearborn, and Ann Arbor, and continue through to Kalamazoo, with a final destination of Chicago.

Birmingham's iconic 1931 railroad station remains the Rail District's signature landmark. Constructed by Walbridge and Aldinger, Detroit building contractors, the Birmingham station is architecturally noted as a scaled-down replica of the Birmingham, England train station.

The former train station's Tudor Revival edifice now houses The Big Rock Chop House. The depot was purchased and initially reopened as Norman's Eton Street Station restaurant, and when that run was through, owner and restaurateur Norm LePage renovated the building and reopened it as the Big Rock Chop House.

Through the efforts of LePage, the building has been preserved. It features a gabled Vermont slate roof in a patchwork of terra cotta, ivory, and granite with ivy tendrils cascading down limestone exterior walls, to a cobbled circular driveway. It's fronted by a complementary gabled entryway with a recessed round head entrance of white limestone, lying on a concrete foundation framed by structural steel.

"Norm LePage has been an incredible steward of that building, and the restaurant has done well," McElhone

said. "It could have been left vacant, but it's a viable business and model of historical preservation."

LePage converted Norman's Eton Street Station in 1997 to try his hand at a new concept that drew an added demographic.

"Norm's was casual but high-end, but people were looking for something different," LePage said. "We wanted to keep our existing clientele who were decidedly a littler older, yet bring in a younger crowd. It worked out perfectly."

In 2005, LePage built The Reserve banquet facility on the property.

"Norm spared no expense to make sure it was spectacular," said General Manager Vera Day Rizer. "We have a full kitchen and all our pastries are homemade in our own bakery by pastry chefs. The bathrooms are fabulous and the tented patio has heated pavers."

Distinct themes resonate throughout Big Rock. The rustic and elegant dining room is designed as an upscale Pacific Northwest lodge accented by game head mounts including bison, bull and water buffalo.

The enclosed terrace is akin to a California vineyard with decorative grapes and lighting creating an atrium effect. Doors lead out to an adjacent outside dining patio. Both were added in 2005.

Upstairs, plans are underway to cordon off a cigar bar. "Got Rocks" will open this month in response to the state smoking ban in public food establishments, set to take effect May 1. The room features crimson and ebony eclectic patterns subdued by polished woods.

LePage opted to add another 2,000 square feet in 1997 for a brewery run by a full-time brewmaster who concocts up to eight hand-crafted specialty beers daily.

The basement houses the wine cellar, where Native American etchings along the walls recall the city's earliest history. It's an elongated arched gateway where commuter passengers once boarded the north side of the tracks, when the Grand Trunk Western Railroad (GTW) owned the establishment.

The city adopted an Eton Corridor Plan in 1998 as a means of guiding future development along Eton. The vision of all stakeholders involved included mixed uses of new, small-scale commercial developments that would satisfy existing and future neighborhood residents while minimizing the impact of traffic on existing residential neighborhoods. Moreover, the appearance of the corridor was a high priority. The development was to be visually compatible with the adjacent neighborhoods, streetscape improvements, quality architecture, and improved screening.

"Over the last decade, we've done a conversion of industrial into mixed-use and residential," said City Planning Director Jana Ecker. "The city is now gearing up to develop a master plan for Kenning Park at the southern end to decide the future use of what's there."

Today the Rail District, defined by its historical preservation, is effervescent, brimming with its own charm, and a portal of possibility. Implementation of aspects of the Eton Corridor Plan, including Eton roadway and streetscape improvements, helped bring the area to its status as a revitalized neighborhood. Yet, there's more work to be done, and issues to resolve.

Just a notch down the road from The Big Rock Chop House at the %

corner of Villa and Eton, a small hamlet of brownstone condominiums and independent businesses make up the District Lofts and Eton Station Developments. People live upstairs, while the street level is reserved for retail or service businesses. While conceptually innovative and unique, visibility is obscured and considered a pervasive problem in the Rail District.

"It's a private area, and people don't know businesses are there," said City Planner Sheila Bashiri. "Some businesses have put frame signs along Eton Street, but the city ordinance doesn't allow for that; however, we don't want to discourage business. The idea is to keep the streetscape clean and consistent."

The city's sign ordinance will be tailored for the Rail District to help it capture its own distinctive personality.

"The area is eclectic with small industry, retail and services that don't sit close up to the street, so it calls for a different ordinance," Bashiri said. "The developments have been struggling with visibility, and need monument signs to show they're an Eton Street Development."

LePage, also owner of the District Lofts, said originally the 24 units were to be sold as condominiums, but that idea fell through due to the collapse of the housing market.

"We built them at the wrong time," he said. "We sold nine units, but then people couldn't get the financing. Now we have a 100 percent occupancy rate (for rentals), with people on a waiting list."

Constructed in an open style, the lofts were designed by Birmingham architect Victor Saroki. LePage said he may build and lease out another building in the foreseeable future.

"I'm considering it, but haven't pulled the trigger on it yet," he said.

Crosswind Developments own the Eton Station lofts just south of LePage's complex.

The Rail District Association, a coterie of business owners, has designed a logo including a locomotive graphic symbol, which will be featured on banners, stationery, and business cards in the near future.

Stuart Shuster, a Birmingham Historical Society and Museum board member and a former General Motors Design Center staff designer, helped develop the logo.

"Just being familiar and interested in railroad history, it was easy to come up with the design," Shuster said. "We have plans to put the logo on directional signs in the district."

Currently, the Rail District Association is comprised of 60 members and is working to attract even more.

"It was formed to bring awareness and traffic to the area, and is working with the city on signage for exposure, as well as the physical elements," said Carrie Zarotney, president of the Birmingham Bloomfield Chamber of Commerce. "The chamber helped with the bylaws as a baseline for the organization."

According to the association's mission statement, the rail district's sobriquet is "Birmingham's Hidden Gem." The goal is to provide an inviting, welcoming destination for surrounding communities; "a pedestrian and family-friendly area of diverse businesses, activities and amenities; an oasis of relaxed, easily accessible shopping, dining, and recreation in an urban setting; and a unique space to linger and return to often."

Frequent tenant turnover has made it difficult to determine which businesses remain strong.

"When we canvas the area, we don't know which ones are viable businesses," said Holly Kaiser, the Rail District Association's president and owner of Studio 5.

The Rail District Association is a tight-knit community seeking to draw more business and stimulate growth by taking on one initiative at a time.

"We're starting to have conversations on the sign ordinances," Kaiser said. "We will work together with local government and businesses so people can find us. It's been a problem for the back properties, me being one. The district has grown so much and we just don't get the visibility. It's a consistent business gripe."

Apart from the Big Rock Chop House, the only other restaurant along the Eton Corridor is the neighborhood-friendly Whistle Stop Restaurant, located on Eton north of Palmer.

According to some building owners, the lack of bistros or full-scale restaurants in the Rail District may impede future growth in the area.

"We would love to have another restaurant in the area, but the city codes are different here, and to get a restaurant in here would be %o

difficult due to the parking problem," said Ara Atesian, owner of Atesian Realty/Artesian Property Inc.

LePage emphatically insists that the Rail District needs a more extensive choice of restaurants for patrons, and denounces the city's move to exclude the Rail District from acquiring bistro licenses.

"We need bistros to make it a real walkable area and need to give people a reason to come here besides retail and the Big Rock," he said. "Competition will bring more action to our town."

According to LePage, Birmingham's City Commission voted against issuing bistro licenses in the Rail District due to the potential for increased traffic and property devaluation.

"Eton is well traveled," he said. "There's no question there is a different flavor here and we have a great opportunity to enhance the area. You have all things in place to create alternatives to the downtown, but only by adding bistros."

City Manager Tom Markus said the City Commission voted against issuing bistro licenses in the Rail District after weighing comments from area businesses and adjacent residents.

"Neighbors and some businesses declined to have bistros expanded into the area as part of the whole bistro discussion," he said. "Individuals in the neighborhood around the district were not in favor of it."

The rail district's mix of light industrial and more creative businesses presumes a SoHo-like urban style. The Cole Street Business Center is comprised of cinder-blocked buildings housing independent and unique businesses such as interior design firms Colorworks Studios and Arkitektura, and work-out facilities like Coach Me Fit and the Goldfish Swim Club.

"It's a design and creative area," Atesian said. "Most tenants are in some creative design, but the center also encompasses kids art shops, dance studios, and cooking classes."

Atesian owns four buildings in the Cole Street Business Center, and said tenant turnover is relatively low. He leases 41 spaces, of which 38 are currently occupied.

"Most of my tenants are very strong, with only one or two a year moving out, and those are start-up businesses," he said.

Several businesses have relocated from downtown Birmingham's Central Business District, seeking lower rents, free parking for customers, and a more diverse environment.

South of Lincoln are long-time Birmingham institutions such as the Birmingham Racquet Club, Forest Hills Swim Club, and the Birmingham Ice Sports Arena.

"The businesses and offerings of service are a great representative of the area," said chamber president Zarotney. "It's an eclectic mix. There's still a number of prospectors looking at the area because of the space available."

Parking in the Rail District is considered a problem that hinders any potential for new restaurants.

"My site, according to city codes, couldn't sustain a restaurant because of parking," Atesian said.

LePage built his own parking structure to accommodate his patrons.

"We built a structure in the middle of the lofts, Reserve and Big Rock," he said. "That's the way we had to do it. In addition, we have underground parking for the lofts."

For the rest of the district, however, parking is a never-ending battle.

"There are too many businesses with not enough spaces," Kaiser said. "The landlord is creating the problem — there are only so many places to park, and we're landlocked."

Markus said it's up to the businesses to make parking available.

"Each business is required to have on-site parking," he said. "It's a pretty eclectic mix of businesses with different types of uses and different parking needs. If parking is strained, then it's up to them to deal with it."

Asked if constructing a city parking structure in the Rail District would be a possibility in the future, Markus said it would be contingent on how the economy unfolds.

"The plan calls for mixed uses in the community," he said. "There's a lot of development in the area and we'd have to address that, but it's economy-driven and we need to wait until the economy straightens out. That being said, we'd like to see a lot of things evolve there."%

Frontage on the east side of the Eton Road corridor consists of a wide range of uses, including commercial, office/warehouse, industrial, and public uses. The west side of Eton is predominantly single-family residential buildings, with a multiple-family residential development and commercial use concentrated just south of Maple Road.

A bike route runs along the west side of the street as part of a regional pathway system.

Today, the Rail District is on the cusp of coming around full circle. What was once a railway epicenter facilitating the transportation of throngs to Dearborn, Detroit and Chicago will soon be revived through the Birmingham/Troy Transit Center.

"It's an up and coming area, especially with the Transit Center going in," Zarotney said.

The transit center was conceptualized in 1999, when developer Grand Sakwa of Farmington Hills sought to purchase the former Ford New Holland Tractor site in Troy. They filed a lawsuit against Troy under the Brownfield Redevelopment Plan to get the zoning they wanted. A consent judgment allowed for the development they desired, with the stipulation that they give the city of Troy a portion of the land, approximately 4 acres, at the edge of Birmingham against the railroad tracks, for use as a transit center, as long as construction began by June 2010.

It's called an intermodal transit center since it is designed as a hub for intercity train, regional bus routes, taxi, and black sedan services. There is a possibility of rental cars being available as well. In addition to being a train station, there will be four full bus slips, room in front for taxis and black sedan cars, and possibly a kiosk inside for rental cars.

The transit center building, to be situated off of Doyle Drive, behind Midtown Square in Troy, will be approximately 2,400 square feet, with a waiting area, ticket seller space, restrooms, kiosk area, and janitor space. It is designed as a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) building, with a green roof, recycling for a water irrigation system, geothermal HVAC, LED lighting, re-use rainwater, and will use regional and recycled materials in building the center.

Passengers will board from the Birmingham side, necessitating construction of a pedestrian tunnel beneath the tracks connecting the transit center — to be built on the Troy side of the tracks — with a Birmingham access site. The pedestrian tunnel is expected to be built in the area of Cole Street.

"It will be absolutely fabulous when the transit center comes in," LePage said. "If you look at studies, a transit center has the potential to increase property values and business by 25 to 300 percent. We need to be prepared for it and add to the equation more bistros to enhance the area."

Rail District Association President Kaiser said she too sees great potential for commerce once the transit center is completed, as long as additional parking is available.

"There will be plenty of land to put up city parking for the influx of people," Kaiser said. "With land acquisition, the parking situation must be addressed."

The transit center is expected to cost approximately \$7 million, not including land acquisition.

The city of Birmingham has been working to acquire land in the Rail District for the pedestrian tunnel, as there is no vacant land in the area.

The Birmingham City Commission announced in January that it had an

offer to purchase a portion of the former Birmingham Public Schools transportation yard on Eton.

"Any land acquisition is discussed in closed session, but we're certainly working on it," said city planning director Ecker.

State and local government officials, in tandem with Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) officials, announced in January that the proposed intermodal transit center has received all of its necessary funding.

Michigan will receive \$40 million in federal high speed rail funding from the American Recovery Reinvestment Act Congress enacted last year, and Michigan will invest a portion of these funds to build the new Transit

Center.

"We applied for \$8.5 million," Ecker said. "In December, we received \$1.3 million in federal transportation appropriation earmarks, which President (Barack) Obama signed into law Dec. 18."

The Department of Labor, Energy and Growth awarded the center a \$250,000 LED grant, and with combined funding sources, will fully fund the transit center.

Ecker noted that it is believed these grants don't require matching funds. The city of Troy had set aside \$1.3 million in case matching funds were needed.

When asked about timing of the center's construction, Ecker said, "as soon as possible," but noted that federal paperwork still needs to be completed.

According to Ecker, there's an operating and maintenance plan in place which spells out what costs would be split between Troy and Birmingham.

"The transit plan is designed with green systems, so operating costs will be low," she said. "We haven't decided 100 percent on costs because we don't know if we're manning the station. The goal was to lease out kiosks to have income to pay for maintenance costs. This way, we wouldn't necessarily have to staff it, just clean it."

WHO'S WHO IN THE RAIL DISTRICT

Here's a list of businesses with storefronts currently operating within Birmingham's Rail District.

- Arkitektura In-situ, 2131 Cole
- Art For A Cause, 643 S. Eton
- Auto Europe Auto Europe, 677 S. Eton
- B&R Auto Repair & Towing, 2330 Cole
- Beauty Collective, 256 S. Eton
- Bednarski Photographics, 2155 Cole
- Big Rock Chop House, 245 S. Eton
- Birmingham Door LLC, 2333 Cole

- Bob Adams Towing Inc., 2499 Cole
- Bolyard Lumber, 777 S. Eton
- Budget Blinds, 2254 Cole
- Canine Inn, 2295 E. Lincoln
- Carnovale Associates Inc., 2006 Cole
- Classic Appreciation, 677 S. Eton
- Classic Country Antiques, 2003 Cole
- Coach Me Fit, 2125 Cole
- Cole Street Salon and Spa, 2388 Cole
- Colorworks Studio Inc., 2159 Cole
- CTI Property Services Inc., 2254 Cole
- Dunlap Design Group, 2215 Cole
- EDE Center For Dance, 2171 Cole
- Elite Imaging Systems, Inc., 2231 Cole
- Essentials of Eton Street, 2279 Cole
- Eton Market, 250 S. Eton
- Faith's Bookkeeping Services, 3748 Tyler
- Festivities Studio, 2155 Cole
- Forest Hill Swim Club, 2410 E. Lincoln
- Fuzz Athletics, 2223 Cole
- Gail's Darn Yarn, 2028 Hazel

- Gerych's Graziella Ltd, 2211 Cole
- Goldfish Swim School, LLC, 2388 Cole
- Hauley Services, 3026 Horton
- Homework Interiors LLC, 2239 Cole
- James Douglas Interiors, 2233 Cole
- Jones Keena & Co Jones, 2292 Cole
- Laurie Tennet Studio, 929 S. Eton
- Metamora Canine Academy, 953 S. Eton
- Metropolitan Tailor, Inc., 2235 Cole
- Miss Kate's Maids, 2121 Cole
- Mollycoddle Studio, 663 S. Eton
- Moran's Floral of Birmingham, 2129 Cole
- Penzo Penzo B Joglois, 2026 Hazel
- Priss Cosmetics, 2225 Cole
- Quality Coach Collision LLC, 2300 Cole
- Red Orange USA, 2139 Cole
- Restyle Child, 2123 Cole
- Saretsky Hart Michaels & Gould PC, 995 S. Eton
- Serba Interiors, 2233 Cole
- State Farm, 955 S. Eton
- Studio 5 Inc., 2151 Cole

- Swanson Meads Architects, Inc., 2215 Cole
- The Chop Shop, 2221 Cole
- Tiger City Transport, 2145 Cole
- Transdermal Corp., 2002-B Hazel
- Tweak “The Athletic Edge”, 2135 Cole
- Tyler Dumas Reyes, 2388 Cole
- Watch Hill, 6455 S. Eton
- Weiss Antiques Gallery, 665 S. Eton
- Whistlestop, 501 Cole
- Wonderworks Art Studio, 2227 Cole
- Yoga For Life Center, 502 Lewis Court