

SEATTLE
DAILY JOURNAL OF COMMERCE
WWW.DJC.COM

June 09, 2008

Moving Midway forward

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Photo courtesy of the city of Kent [\[enlarge\]](#)

The intersection at Pacific Highway and Kent-Des Moines Road has a shopping center, and sits just up the road from Highline Community College. The cities of Kent and Des Moines want to encourage more investment along the corridor. The four-mile stretch of Pacific Highway South that runs south of Sea-Tac Airport to South 272nd Street ought to have a lot going for it: It's well situated between Seattle and Tacoma, has plenty of developable land, plus views of Puget Sound, the Olympics and Mount Rainier.

The Kent-Des Moines Road intersection, for example, is home to a shopping center filled with fast-food restaurants, shops and other

commercial services, and Highline Community College is just to the south, at South 240th Street.

Still, the auto-oriented corridor, known as Midway, has long been a magnet for crime and blight. The cities of Kent and Des Moines, which share an untidy border along Pacific Highway (Kent is mainly on the east, Des Moines is on the west) have sought for years to stimulate investment in the community.

There may be hope on the way.

The state Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development recently awarded a \$125,000 grant to the two cities, which have kicked off a joint project called Envision Midway.

The grant will help cover the cost of community outreach and a new Web site, www.envisionmidway.com. The grant will also support the use of a virtual reality tool designed to help users view different development scenarios in 3-D.

The aim of the Envision Midway project, according to a mission statement crafted by the Kent and Des Moines city councils, is to “transform the Midway community into a sustainable urban area which enhances commercial development and optimizes its geographic location, wide range of transportation options, educational institutions and views.”

The study area focuses a narrow swath, mainly between Pacific Highway and Interstate 5, running from South 216th to South 272nd streets. The study area stretches out to the west to encircle Highline Community College in Des Moines and to the east to include the 60-



acre Kent Highlands Landfill, which closed in 1986.

The lead project consultant is Cascade Design Collaborative. Berk and Associates is a subconsultant.

The corridor currently features a desultory lineup of uses, at turns showing evidence of prosperity and wear and tear. Newer office buildings, shopping plazas and big-box stores sit incongruously among vacant lots, empty buildings, pawn shops, seedy motels and “bikini baristas.” Light-industrial businesses like body shops, self-storage companies, and construction-equipment suppliers also line the road.

Population growth along the corridor has been minimal over the last decade, according to an Envision Midway estimate, but the neighborhood has become increasingly diverse. Hispanics now make up about 20 percent of population. Though median household income in the study area ranges from \$27,300 to \$61,400, more than a quarter of the people in the neighborhood live below the poverty line.

But changes already on the way could shape the future the corridor.

The Port of Seattle plans to develop 1 million square feet of retail, office and manufacturing on an 89-acre site at South 216th, just west of Pacific Highway. An 11-acre mixed-use development called Waterview Crossing, planned by Sunway Services, could bring as many as 1,600 new residential units to South 220th Street.

King County Metro plans to begin bus rapid-transit service along the corridor in 2010. The city of Des Moines is also seeking an extension of the Sound Transit light-rail line along the highway, though that could be years, maybe decades, away.

For Envision Midway, the challenge is not just to encourage more such development, but to guide it.

“One of the goals of this study is to look at the zoning and permitted uses, and to provide a little more predictability,” said Denise Lathrop, planning manager for the city of Des Moines.

Outreach efforts include holding community open houses and working

with a stakeholders committee that includes residents, business owners, developers, city council members, and transit representatives.

Envision Midway, Lathrop said, is asking people what businesses they use in the area and what changes they would like to see.

Responses so far have emphasized the need for more housing, pedestrian-oriented amenities and opportunities to use transit. At least one resident feared how well mobile-home park tenants would fare if new development were to squeeze them out.

Envision Midway is preparing for more open houses in the coming weeks and a developers forum in July.

By this time next year the city of Kent, as part of the project, will create draft development design guidelines that could include overlays for transit-oriented development as well as a draft area subarea plan, and draft zoning codes to reconcile differences between Kent and Des Moines along the corridor.

In Des Moines, for example, regulations north of Kent-Des Moines Road in the Pacific Ridge neighborhood are more permissive than Kent's, allowing 100- and 200-foot buildings. The Des Moines City Council recently approved a height limit increase to accommodate the densely built Waterview Crossing development.

Kent city planner Gloria Gould-Wesson, project lead for Envision Midway, said the cities also intend to produce a "planned action" ordinance that will streamline the environmental review process for future developments.

According to Lathrop, the future of Midway will likely be taller and denser, particularly as more housing is developed to accommodate students and workers in the area. Developers have complained in the past that current zoning restricts mixed uses.

Other changes could include more amenities like plazas, parks, lighting and streetscape improvements.

Lisa Skari, vice president for institutional advancement at Highline

Community College, the area's largest employer, said the corridor could use more transportation options, including a park-and-ride lot closer to campus.

The college has 10,000 students and over 1,250 employees.

Denser development, with complementary services such as shopping, food and housing, she added, would improve the sense of community for students, faculty and staff.

The success of Midway could hinge on whether the crime, drugs and prostitution along the corridor go away or are here to stay.

Crime hasn't been much of a problem on the Highline campus, Skari said, and perceptions may be worse than the reality. Still, she admitted, the campus occasionally sees some "very interesting activity."

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