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Real Estate Buzz: Give your regards to old Broadway

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Last Saturday, Mayor Greg Nickels and other volunteers took to the street to spiff up Broadway.

The event was part of Nickels' plan to improve the health and appearance of Capitol Hill's scruffy main drag.

The plan involves spending \$220,000 to make over the street and \$125,000 to help re-form the Capitol Hill Chamber of Commerce and a Capitol Hill improvement district. The latter pot of money is also paying for a study on how to improve retail to attract nearby residents, among other things.

A team has been working for about a year to re-form the chamber and hopes to have it incorporated by the end of the year, said the chamber's interim director Amani Loutfy. Now, the fledgling organization is defining its scope and talking to merchants and residents to determine what services they want and what benefits the chamber can offer.

The new chamber's membership includes business owners, residents, arts organization representatives, developers and others in real estate.

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One of those developers is Richard Muhlebach, senior managing director of Kennedy Wilson Properties Northwest. His company is building The Heights on Capitol Hill, a 104-unit apartment project with about 8,000 square feet of retail at Broadway and East Olive Way.

Other big developments near or under construction in the area include the S/I Broadway-owned Brix, at 530 Broadway E., which will add 141 condos and 7,500 square feet of retail. The Broadway and Pine Apartments is being developed by Capitol Hill Housing. It will have 44 low-income units, a Walgreens drug store and two floors of underground parking.

A fourth project is in the planning stages. Seattle-based Harvard Avenue Investments, headed by Bob Burkheimer, is planning 300 apartments and 25,000 square feet of retail on the former QFC site at 523 Broadway E. with an as yet unnamed partner.

"There's probably going to be close to 700 units on Broadway within a five-block distance that will add about 1,000 people living on Broadway in the next three years," said Muhlebach.

He and the mayor credit recent zoning changes that raised height limits and lowered parking requirements. Muhlebach said the new projects will help businesses and increase Broadway's economic and social diversity.

Capitol Hill has a lot going for it, he said. It has economic diversity and density. It is adjacent to the financial

district and First Hill, with its large medical community. It is the “cultural center for the Pacific Northwest.” And Seattle University and Seattle Central Community College are there.

More students and people who live north of Capitol Hill would shop Broadway if it had more retail that appealed to them, he said.

Using the city money, the chamber has hired Gray & Associates of Portland to see where Capitol Hill now gets its shoppers and how it can expand that market. The firm will also look at ways to attract a better business mix and how to support existing businesses.

Randy Wiger, who chaired the Capitol Hill Neighborhood Plan Stewardship Council from 2002 to 2004, thinks finding the right retail mix will help fix what ails Broadway more than new housing will — although he’s for that, too.

With upwards of 20,000 people living within five blocks of the main corridor, “The buying public is there already and adding a few hundred more people is not something that is going to all of a sudden cure all the economic challenges of Broadway,” said Wiger, who now lives in Fremont, but often shops Capitol Hill.

The developers and other real estate types on the chamber include Brix investment manager Suzi Morris, Burkheimer, Chuck Weinstock of Capitol Hill Housing, Allan Jones of Russell Jones Real Estate and Dana Behar of HAL Real Estate Investments. HAL developed The Braeburn, a 153-unit condo and retail project at 15th and Pine.

Muhlebach said some of the developers may bow out of the chamber when their projects sell out, but he expects the new owners will likely be involved in the community.

He said he doesn’t think the new projects will gentrify the neighborhood as it has a large residential stock, ranging from expensive homes to workforce housing.

“The amount of new development is just a small fraction of the housing on Capitol Hill,” he said.

It will, however, put more shoppers on the street, he said.