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## El Cajon Boulevard undergoing transformation



Photo courtesy of El Cajon Boulevard BIA

A rendering of H.G. Fenton's Blvd 165-unit multifamily project on El Cajon Boulevard.

By Thor Kamban Biberman

El Cajon Boulevard is in the midst of a complete transformation with new housing, new retail and a new vibe. And now it seeks a unified vision.

Later this month, the final Blvd. 20/20 Plan document from the El Cajon Boulevard Business Improvement Association (BIA) is slated to be unveiled.

There has been plenty of interest in the effort.

In December, more than 75 area residents came to The Rock Church in City Heights to voice their views. Many support the effort to create more transit-oriented developments, according to BIA officials and others who attended the meeting. Others are concerned about how the higher densities may affect their neighborhoods, and still others are clinging to their cars.

"We have to get rid of the old attitudes," said Tootie Thomas, president of the El Cajon Boulevard BIA. "We don't need three lanes of cars going along the length of the boulevard. We need a safer environment for bikes and a rapid bus system."

In the spring of 2017, a pedestrian was killed trying to cross at the intersection of El Cajon Boulevard and Kansas

Street in North Park. At least nine others had been struck at that same intersection during the previous 10 years, according to a Channel 7/39 report.

Auto dealerships have long occupied the boulevard. Thomas said while she does not want to take business away from the car dealerships that are trying to make a living, she wants to ensure the boulevard has a good balance of uses.

A total of four new freeway-level transit stations were added in the area within the past year.

Last March, the Metropolitan Transit System opened the four new transit stations at the junctions of Interstate 15 and University Avenue and I-15 and El Cajon Boulevard.

At the meeting last month, business improvement association officials said there was overwhelming support from the attendees, comprised mostly of residents and business owners within a two-block area of the boulevard, for a dedicated bus rapid transit lane, starting with a pilot project at one or more high-traffic sections of the four-mile corridor.

"I don't think it's a heavy lift to have bus rapid transit along that corridor," said Andrew Malick of Malick Infill Development, who has developed housing along the corridor.

Malick said El Cajon Boulevard is one of the few areas in the city that has the capacity to develop high-density residential. He also said some existing properties could be better utilized.

As one example, Malick said there is no reason that Sonic or Starbucks couldn't be on the first floor of a residential development, rather than taking up land with drive-thrus and parking lots.

"You could house a lot of people in these places," he said. "You could put the businesses underneath."

Thomas, the president of the El Cajon Boulevard BIA, also wants to see more housing.

She said efficiency or micro units could help provide housing along the boulevard. Put simply, it wouldn't have to be expensive, and it could still look nice.

As for where new housing could go that hasn't already been committed, Thomas said there are numerous vacant lots along the boulevard. Two locations at Fairmont Avenue and the I-15 freeway are being planned for future development.

John O'Connor, a developer and secretary of the El Cajon BIA whose mother, Jackie, was a founder of the association, is on the team planning a 39-unit multifamily project at Kansas and El Cajon Boulevard. That project is slated for completion sometime in 2020.

O'Connor said he and his business partner, David Iwashita, are also developing a 74-unit multifamily project at the northwest corner of I-15 and El Cajon Boulevard. That project was just awarded.

H.G. Fenton, meanwhile, plans to put a tap room at the base of its 165-unit Blvd development in the 2000 block of El Cajon Boulevard between Florida and Alabama streets. The North Park project will include 80 one-bedroom and 85 two-bedroom units.

Architects Orange is Blvd's primary architectural firm, though architect and developer Mike Burnett, a principal with Foundation for Form, partnered on Blvd's design concept. Construction began in 2016. The project is expected to be completed this summer.

"The resulting concept responded to their interest for more community gathering spaces and an open, airier design," Fenton stated.

Burnett said the roughly seven-floor Blvd development is just the type of high-density project -- it features studio to two-bedroom floorplans -- El Cajon Boulevard needs.

Burnett said while the development is tall by community standards, it is stepped back in such a way so as not to be too imposing.

"We know urban infill, and this is an ideal urban infill project for the area," he said.

Burnett noted that while similar projects going forward might have less parking than in the past, that's a good thing.

"I have people in my projects who are all ride shares, and don't have a car," he said. "We don't need concrete bunkers [parking garages] that take all that space."

Formed in 1988, the El Cajon Boulevard Business Improvement Association is an economic development agency comprised of more than 1,000 local small businesses committed to improving the physical and economic conditions along the El Cajon Boulevard corridor and its surrounding neighborhoods in Mid-City San Diego.

The district encompasses 60 blocks along El Cajon Boulevard, from Park Boulevard to 54th Street, including the communities of University Heights, North Park, Normal Heights, Kensington, Talmadge and City Heights.

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