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Guadalupe Gets a Makeover

By Daniel Mottola

Demolition crews have been busy all summer in the 3000 and 3100 blocks of **Guadalupe Street**, making rubble and dust out of the former **Ray's Steakhouse**, **Espresso Lube**, and an old strip mall, and clearing the way for a new mixed-use condo/retail development that planners say will embody the pedestrian-oriented values of the city's proposed commercial design standards.

That's not the only change afoot on Guadalupe. Earlier this year, neighborhood fixture **Half Price Books** vacated its longtime location at 3110 Guadalupe, on the corner of West 31st Street, for a much larger former Randalls on North Lamar. The abandoned run-down building will get a face-lift. Half Price's old rare books building (a former used car office), on the south side of 31st, is being replaced with another building of a similar scale in the same location.

The makeovers of both former Half Price Books buildings are basically gussied up versions of the traditional architecture and development that defines the north-central corridors of Guadalupe, Lamar, and Burnet. The star of the show, however, will be **Guadalupe 31**, a "vertical mixed-use" development designed by Austin's **Dick Clark Architects**. The three-story development, which will fill the space left by recently demolished structures just south of the old Half Price buildings, will feature two residential stories (38 condos priced from \$185,000-\$190,000 for one bedroom, one bath, to \$220,000-\$300,000 for two bedrooms, two baths) on top of 18,000 square feet of ground floor mixed retail with separated business and residential parking located within the 40-foot-tall structure. **Mikal Grimes**, past president of the surrounding **Heritage Neighborhood Association** – from Lamar to Guadalupe and from 29th to 38th streets – said neighbors gave developers **Joe and Peter Lamy** of **Capital City Partners** zoning concessions in exchange for the developers' willingness to conform to a new neighborhood zoning plan intended to concentrate mixed-use density along major corridors. Heritage neighbors recommended bringing the building directly up to the sidewalk to create a pedestrian-oriented "streetscape environment," and moving parking and car activity to the back of the building, according to Grimes. He called neighbors' interactions with the father and son Lamy duo a "success story." The only unresolved concern at this point, says Grimes, is how to handle additional cut-through traffic on the neighborhood streets.

Guadalupe 31's brand of redevelopment is consistent with the City Council's proposed commercial design standards, which are intent on promoting a more pedestrian-friendly, aesthetically pleasurable Austin. The city is expected to codify and enact the new rules by the end of August. "We have a clear mandate from **Envision Central Texas** to pursue vertical mixed-use and infill developments. This is one of several [projects] that achieves that goal," said Council Member **Brewster McCracken**.

Asked about the somewhat steep price of the new condos compared to Guadalupe 31's originally planned rental apartments, Grimes said, "It's neither good nor bad." While affordable housing is an important goal, he said, it wasn't specifically addressed in the Heritage neighborhood plan, but rather by provisions in the

University Neighborhood Overlay, a new zoning plan for nearby West Campus with built-in affordable housing components, including as many as 14 new residential projects. Expected to add residential occupancy in the area for another 5,000 people over the next five years, the UNO will make renting around the university much more affordable, said Heritage neighbor **Ric Hardin**.

In what he described as the precarious task of securing local businesses for the project, developer Joe Lamy said the decision to go condo was made in part because "a typical owner occupant is more likely than a renter to maintain the quality of the property," making it more attractive to local commercial tenants who are less likely to take a chance on a risky location. "Retailers don't want something that will get trashed," he said. "We're trying to pick [retail] tenants who are local, but we'll probably end up with a mix," he said. While Grimes says he and neighbors "clearly articulated desires that we want local businesses," he acknowledges that the economic reality of redevelopment will likely yield a mix of local and national businesses.

Austin-based **Southwest Strategies Group**, owner and developer of the former Half Price Books site, is known for such projects as South Congress' Penn Field and the recently awarded downtown Seaholm Power Plant revamp. Partner **Danny Roth** says, "our emphasis is on local businesses still having a home." He says SWSG has already inked agreements with three local outfits: **Celebration!**, a gift shop that's been in Hyde Park for 20 years; **Boomerang's Veggie and Meat Pies**, a restaurant he calls a "new concept" for Austin; and **Gelato's**, an ice-cream, coffee, and panini shop with two other Austin locations. (Incidentally, Gelato's features coffee and signage from Starbucks subsidiary Seattle's Best Coffee.)

While SWSG's proposed makeover of the old Half Price Books building elicited little reaction from neighbors, the redevelopment of its smaller counterpart to the south, the former rare books house where Gelato's will be located, has left neighbors feeling jilted. By demolishing and resurrecting the building in the same location with a similar footprint and paved parking area, the developers were able to side-step city requirements for a new zoning site plan and, as a result, avoided triggering neighborhood compatibility requirements that would've required a new site plan to coincide with the Heritage neighborhood plan, Grimes said. "Obviously, we would've preferred redevelopment in accordance with the neighborhood plan," he said, explaining that the site's massive front and rear paved parking areas are considered a "nonconforming use" by the Heritage plan. SWSG plans to use the site as parking for the several businesses housed in the main building. "The reality is that we had to replace a dilapidated building," Roth said. McCracken, however, argues that this sort of redevelopment is "only there to serve auto traffic, not people," and ultimately "degrades the corridor."

Construction will begin on the "classic contemporary" Guadalupe 31 in about two weeks and will end by summer 2006, Lamy said. Gelato's and the other aforementioned businesses at 3110 Guadalupe will open by the end of the summer, says Roth, who hopes to have the rest of the project completed by the end of the year.