

Forming a Strategy

by Doug Schwartz

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Efforts to improve the economic climate on Broadway were once again the focus of a community gathering last week. But where similar efforts have often met with an underwhelming or even indifferent response, the Thursday, March 16, event, held in the afternoon inside the Northwest Film Forum, was a success based on the crowd alone. More than 85 people attended, creating a palpable sense of enthusiasm over Broadway's future if not quite a direct and concrete plan about what to do next.

Dubbed a retail strategy forum, the event was sponsored by the Capitol Hill Improvement District (CHID), an organization that is working to gain the signatures necessary to create a self-taxing improvement district among Capitol Hill property owners.

Chip Ragen, who has been working on CHID for two years, admitted that the signature-gathering effort had slowed. But while those efforts may have stalled, there is great interest in seeing Broadway's, and Capitol Hill's, business fortunes improve.

"We're asking what do we do to start improving things now?" asked Ragen. "We need a unifying voice to interact with the city, we need a broader organizational capacity. One of the things we're doing today is getting a larger base of people to move forward. The goal is to come up with a retail strategy to help owners bring in quality retail."

Sue Miller, representing Portland's Pearl District, gave a detailed presentation about the extensive efforts undertaken to establish a thriving business district in a larger area of that city that had been neglected for many years. While the districts are quite different, Miller referenced the need for dedicated business and community organizations.

"The Pearl District succeeded because of stakeholder involvement, which wasn't easy at first. But priorities were established over time and a vision created to bring new retailers into the district," she said.

She also pointed the Pearl District's 260-strong business advocacy group, which gets attention at Portland's City Hall.

"You get a better response as a group than if you're an individual," Miller said.

Paula Rees, president of the local design and consulting firm Maestri, followed with a short and enthusiastically received presentation.

"People and customers are looking for great places to be, people places, and you have that here. You're sitting in the middle of a great, dense area. But Broadway should look at the essence of the place. How does Broadway feel as far as customer service? Where is your heart when you think of Capitol Hill?" she said.

Rees added that a large business foundation is located in the Pike-Pine corridor, which suggested that future marketing efforts potentially include both business districts. And she addressed public safety, so long a concern for Broadway businesses and customers.

"Broadway's problem is not the reality, it's the perception," she said. "You have to focus on how to re-tell your story."



Photo/Doug Schwartz

Paula Rees makes a point during last week's retail strategy forum.

Steve Johnson, acting director of the city's Office of Economic Development (OED), said the city agrees that Broadway has significant business issues and that the city has a role in helping overcome them.

"We need to find out what the city should do to help Broadway," he said. "We want to support an organizational infrastructure that represents all interests. [Broadway] is a priority of the mayor and city council."

Following the event, David Schraer, the consultant working on creating the CHID, said the forum exceeded expectations.

"I think everyone was blown away by how many people came and how interesting the presentation was. It's hard to say what to draw from it. But it was an interesting point of view that boutique shopping might be the new future of retail and what people are looking for," he said.

He added that work now under way to create a retail market strategy, which people seem to agree is a desirable step, is helping as an organizing strategy. A survey on the subject will be sent out later this week. And a larger, umbrella business/community organization could be established if enough people welcomed the idea.

"This is one step at a time, but the Hill needs to have a group to really partner with the city, a group with a dedicated fulltime staff person to work on these issues," he said. Such staff advocacy has been lacking since the Capitol Hill Chamber of Commerce folded 16 months ago and since the Broadway Business Improvement Association stopped having an executive director at the end of 2002.

Ragen said that CHID will reach out to form that new entity, one that represents business owners, property owners, residents and nonprofit groups - in short, all those who have a vested interest in Broadway and Capitol Hill's health. He pointed out that OED held its first Broadway Action Group meeting the day after the retail strategy forum. Simultaneous efforts at improving Broadway are under way.

"The question remains, can we create enough interest and commitment to raise the money necessary to create the marketing tools that will help the Capitol Hill business districts compete for shoppers. We'll see," he said.

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