

Claiborne cleanup

New retailers move into neglected stretch

by Ariella Cohen



Johnny Pekins of Gator Sign Co. puts the finishing touches on a lighted sign at a new Family Dollar on South Claiborne Avenue. (Photo by Frank Aymami)

On a freshly paved stretch of South Claiborne Avenue, developer Kevin Keller is putting the finishing touches on what he calls the world's costliest Family Dollar.

The \$2.8-million store cost roughly double that of a typical Family Dollar location, said Keller, who has built more than a dozen stores for the Charlotte, N.C.-based discount retailer.

"I started one today on Old Gentilly Road that will cost \$1.04 million," Keller said.

Keller, based in Baton Rouge, said landscaping expenses drove up the cost of his 2147 South Claiborne Ave. store. It's a rare investment in the rundown, six-lane corridor of convenience stores, boarded-up fast-food restaurants and gas stations connecting Jefferson Parrish to downtown New Orleans.

Keller paid \$1.2 million last year just for the lot on the corner of Jackson Avenue next to a Rally's Hamburgers drive-through.

Costly vintage lamps and clapboard-trimmed windows at Keller's Family Dollar contrast with the other stores on South Claiborne, a long-neglected stretch of road the city's Office of Recovery and Development Administration designated a recovery zone and a priority site for publicly funded infrastructure and road improvements and developments.

Keller's Family Dollar's pricey discount store renovation illustrates a major pothole slowing the road to recovery.

"(The cost) should be worth it in the end," Keller said. "But so far, the location has been tough. I tried to get several major national retail tenants (before settling on the Family Dollar) but the biggest problem is the first thing you see when you get off the exit from the highway is a bunch of vagrants sitting there. Major retailers don't want to come here. They say it needs to be cleaned up."

Keller built his store according to commercial rezoning rules the City Council approved in November. The rezoning, which bans packaged liquor stores and check-cashing outlets while allowing larger stores with sidewalks and street lights, dictated Keller build his shop closer to the roadway than older establishments and wrap the building in a four-sided façade with clapboard-trimmed windows rather than the cheaper one-sided front façade common among roadside retailers.

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Other developers are grappling with the street's rough terrain, too.

A few blocks from Keller's Family Dollar, developer Paul Dorsey is in final negotiations with prospective retail tenants for a former Winn-Dixie at the corner of Washington Avenue, which has been shuttered since Hurricane Katrina. The vacant 60,000-square-foot store has been a hot topic of conversation among residents who miss the supermarket.

"People want to see something there. It comes up in every meeting with stakeholders and community members in the area," said Jim Livingston, director of City-Works, a nonprofit working with the American Institute of Architects on a corridor planning report.

The tenant lineup for Dorsey's site includes a Save-A-Lot grocery store, a Cato fashion outlet, a Tuesday Morning party supply store and a Dollar General.

Central City resident LaDonna Goodman said she will be glad to see the new stores.

"It feels deserted now," Goodman said. "We need stuff like that."

Dorsey, a Metairie native, invested \$2.5 million and months of phone calls into attracting a big-name retailer to the site. His efforts proved futile.

"People want higher-quality tenants but there are questions of demographics and crime. But (the stores lined up now) are what the market is dictating," said Dorsey. "We can't sit on the sidelines forever."

Other investors are wary, too.

"We've been looking at South Claiborne since 2000 but we're still waiting for a plan," said Lewis Stirling, executive vice president of Stirling Properties. "It's six lanes that go from St. Bernard Parish to Jefferson right through New Orleans. You can't ignore it. However, the opportunity has been mismanaged for the last 50 years. There is a lot of devastation there and development is going to be a challenge."

But District B Councilwoman Stacy Head said she is optimistic South Claiborne Avenue could be "a more attractive and urban-friendly Veterans Boulevard" in the future dotted with major mid-range retailers like Old Navy and Circuit City.

"We need to compete with (Jefferson Parish) to create the jobs and investment here," Head said. "Developers are putting their toes in the water on South Claiborne and the first ones that jump in will bring a lot." •