

Reseda officials aim to reinvent community

Theatre to lead downtown face-lift

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RESEDA - In the ruins of the Reseda Theater, residents and public officials see the embers of hope. If things are going to improve on Sherman Way, they believe it has to begin there.

This community has fastened its future on a building that's been shuttered for almost two decades.

"That has been a gaping hole, and it has really hurt our efforts," said Leslie Lambert, regional director for the Community Redevelopment Agency, which bought the theater and is selling it to a developer. "That is the linchpin of downtown Reseda. Unless you do something on that site, you are really spinning your wheels."

Within about a year, the crumbling former stagehouse is to be transformed into a trendy nightclub, the likes of which Reseda hasn't seen since the closure of The Country Club - where in 1981 U2 held its first Los Angeles concert.

Officials hope a hot spot will spur more private investments and accelerate a downtown face-lift. Some observers, however, aren't convinced Reseda will be able to shake its reputation.

"Reseda Boulevard is still a shabby, ugly, broken-down street. The good thing is that cheap restaurants, bicycle stores, taco stands, vacuum repair outlets and pawn shops are also useful to earning a living," Andrew Hurvitz wrote recently on his Web site, hereinvannuys.com.

"People want to be where the action is," said Jacklyn Ovsepyan, 27, a Realtor with Coldwell Banker in Studio City, "and I can't see Reseda having much to do."

Shaped like a square in the center of the West Valley, Reseda is a working-class bedroom community where the median-priced home in December cost about the same as that for all Los Angeles County - \$525,000. Compare that to Reseda's neighbor to the south, Tarzana, where the median-priced home was \$1.04 million.

Once the "hub of the Valley," 91335 is now an incredibly diverse 6.5 square miles where 62,000 people speaking more than 110 languages and dialects dwell. Banks, supermarkets and the Los Angeles Unified School District are the major employers. There are few major attractions.

"We were told that if we ever got a Starbucks in Reseda we'd be on the map," said Garth Carlson, vice chairman of the neighborhood council. "Well, we've got two now and we're still not on the map."

Actually, because it is in Los Angeles, Reseda was put on the map decades ago by the entertainment industry. In 1984, Mr. Miyagi took a Reseda teen and turned him into the Karate Kid. Five years later, with his hit "Free Fallin'," Tom Petty told the world, "It's a long day livin' in Reseda."

In a song by the quasi-pop band Soul Coughing, Mike Doughty sings the line, "We are all in some way or another going to Reseda someday to die."

In 1994, the area between Victory Boulevard and Oxnard Street fled purgatory and joined Encino and Tarzana.

"It never occurred to us until it changed over," said Terry Rainey, 57, an architect who owns a house one block south of Victory, in what is now Encino. "When it did, of course we were happy because the property values jumped."

Like the rest of the San Fernando Valley, Reseda came to life after World War II, when military veterans were in search of a quiet suburban life. Sherman Way and Reseda Boulevard became the community's heart. Its soul - the Reseda Theater - is at their intersection.

Each day, about 85,000 people drive past the theater and see its marquee, according to the Reseda Chamber of Commerce.

"Each one sees a big sign that says Reseda is a piece of crap," said James Hames, a resident eagerly awaiting the renovation.

Built in 1948, the theater was a popular moviehouse until it closed in 1988. The city's redevelopment agency bought it in 2004 for about \$2 million. It plans to spend another \$1.3 million to buy a building behind it needed for parking. The agency is negotiating a contract to sell the properties to the CIM Group, the developers of downtown Brea and several Hollywood clubs.

The agency also plans to spend about \$700,000 to improve 31 building facades on Reseda Boulevard and recently completed an \$850,000 streetscape project, for which the federal government ponied up \$700,000.

Revitalization plans took root shortly after the 1994 Northridge Earthquake, which actually had its epicenter in Reseda. (Northridge Hospital Medical Center also is in Reseda, according to the city, though this is widely disputed and even denied by hospital officials.)

At the direction of then-Mayor Richard Riordan and then-City Councilwoman Laura Chick, redevelopment in the West Valley began in Canoga Park with the \$3-million Madrid Theater renovation. At the time, Canoga Park was plagued by crime and despair. Last year, however, it was one of 10 areas nationwide honored as an "All-America City."

The same formula for success is being applied to Reseda.

"Everything needs to be sparked," said Councilman Dennis Zine, who represents the area. "Pasadena sparked its dilapidated neighborhood a long time ago. San Diego sparked it. And we've run out of space, so this is where we have to go."

The community also has been getting some help from the housing market. In-fill developments are dropping \$800,000 homes into old neighborhoods. Many homeowners, flush with equity after watching their properties double and triple in value during the past five years, have re-modeled 50-year-old houses.

From his place in Canoga Park, Tuan Phan had looked at Reseda and had seen a "slum." In 2001, though, the aerospace consultant stumbled across a new neighborhood near Corbin Avenue and Runnymede Street, and his opinion changed.

"It's nicer around here," he said, standing in the garage of the two-story home he bought for about \$350,000. It's now valued at about \$700,000.

But gritty areas remain.

"As you can see, we have a lot of graffiti artists. And there's another 7-Eleven," Carlson, the neighborhood councilman, said as he drove down Vanowen Street, not far from the West Valley Community Police Station.

In 2005, officers moved out of the trailers they had been using and into the new building, between West Valley Park and the library. The only problem with the location is the misconceptions it causes.

TV reporters covering a murder in the West Valley have an affinity for standing in front of the station and saying, "In Reseda ... "

"We get a lot of press, but it's not good press," Carlson said.

Like the rest of Los Angeles, Reseda has its gangs, its drugs, its prostitutes.

In 2005, Reseda experienced at least 2,024 Part I crimes - 22 percent of those reported for the entire West Valley. That included two of the West Valley's 13 homicides and 20 of the 49 rapes, according to police statistics.

With twice as many residents as Tarzana, Reseda has four times the registered sex offenders (56).

And the city is seeking an abatement against the Howard Johnson Express, which Deputy City Attorney Mike Pizzuti said is plagued by prostitution.

A 15-foot-wide patch of dirt, rocks and weeds that follows the flood-control channel from Sherman Way to Vanowen has become a hostel for the homeless and drug abusing, said Walter Hanna, a Los Angeles police sergeant who moved into a nearby house on Geysler Avenue in 1999.

Hanna has spoken with the neighborhood council about turning the city-owned land into a derelict-free, grass-lined walking path.

As for potholes, Resedans traverse some of the worst-paved roads in the Valley, Carlson said. Cars driving down Valerio Street bounce up and down like a buggie in the desert.

But Reseda also has some proud residents.

Hames moved into a 1,000-square-foot house on Rhea Street one month before the 1994 quake. Dollar for dollar, it was the biggest, nicest place he and his wife could afford.

He loves where he lives, having grown smitten with the shops on Sherman Way and Reseda's central location. The ResedaWeb blog, which Hames writes, has been cheerleading the potential for a reopened Reseda Theater.

"I'm not one to wax nostalgic about the way Reseda was. It wasn't that great 40 years ago," he said, sitting in the Starbucks on Tampa Avenue. "But what it will be is an ethnically diverse, economically sustaining community."

While Reseda likely will continue to self-sustain, its residents rely on outsiders for employment. And that's OK, said Jack Kyser, chief economist at the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp.

Though Reseda is landlocked from any freeway, a Metrolink station is just north of Roscoe Boulevard and the Orange Line busway is a few blocks south of Victory Boulevard, making available public transportation to Warner Center and downtown L.A.

"It is close to everything," said Rep. Brad Sherman, D-Sherman Oaks, whose district encompasses Reseda. "It's not like you have to move to the Antelope Valley. Reseda will always be a more convenient place than Palmdale."

A few years ago, the Democratic congressman attended a grand opening in Reseda for Goodwill. He recalls thinking that some of the other San Fernando Valley communities he serves wouldn't celebrate a thrift store's arrival. But then he remembered what matters to his constituents here.

"If Reseda is a nice place to live and shop and there are jobs in Reseda or close to Reseda, we've done a good job."