

# Parsons Avenue tied to hospital

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**THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH**

*May 29, 2012*

It has been three years since Jay Cheplowitz opened his vegan restaurant and bar -- Hal & Al's -- on Parsons Avenue.

So far, no regrets. Cheplowitz said he thought Hal & Al's would draw patrons from Merion Village and nearby German Village, and it has.

But the future of his and other businesses along Parsons likely will be closely tied to the growth of Nationwide Children's Hospital.

The hospital's expanded footprint at Parsons and Livingston avenues already has had a big effect on the look of the business corridor. The \$786 million expansion is nearly finished, and the new hospital will be dedicated on June 11.

Neighborhood leaders say they hope that, by then, more of the hospital's 8,300 employees and families of patients patronize Parsons Avenue businesses. And they hope that hospital employees move into adjacent neighborhoods that the hospital is trying to fix up with the city and with local nonprofit groups.

"It's going to be the dynamo that powers the resurrection of the South Side," said Ned McNamara, the chairman of the Parsons Avenue Merchants Association.

"There is a tremendous opportunity with the amount of money the hospital has invested in facilities," said **Brian Higgins**, the association board's secretary. "How can we piggyback?"

**Higgins**, a development consultant and a board member of the hospital's Healthy Neighborhoods, Healthy Families initiative, said one thing local leaders have to do is change how the public perceives the area.

People certainly know about the hospital, but they likely know little about Parsons Avenue itself, he said. And what they do know, they probably heard on newscasts. That likely was negative, **Higgins** said.

That's why the association hired a company to help market and brand the area. Crime remains the No. 1 issue, Cheplowitz said. He has seen the petty stuff -- car break-ins, bike thefts.

"We have very little issues inside the bar," he said.

It's the bigger crimes that can be intimidating, he said.

"People that I know from the suburbs will get on Parsons Avenue, and they'll say, 'I'm not getting out of the car,' " Cheplowitz said, adding that police are visible in the area and responsive to calls for help.

**Higgins** said there's an opportunity to bring more restaurants to the neighborhood. A Scrambler Marie's restaurant -- the chain is based in Toledo -- just opened on Livingston near the hospital.

Although chains are nice, the real future is in local, independent retailers willing to take a chance on Parsons, said Bob Leighty, who took over as executive director of the Parsons Avenue Merchants Association three months ago.

Leighty said he would like to see a better mix of retailers so residents don't have to drive to stores such as Target for general, everyday goods.

"We've got enough used-car lots, used-appliance places," said Marc Borst, the president of the merchants association.

Community leaders have been working with the city to clean up Parsons. Volunteers joined with the city and neighborhood leaders this month to remove graffiti and litter while adding 30 hand-painted planters along Parsons, bringing the number to more than 120.

"It's like a 2-mile-long art museum," Leighty said.

This year, at the south end of that stretch, the city will break ground on the \$5 million John Maloney Health and Wellness Center.

And a \$20,000 grant from Lowe's will help property owners spruce up their storefronts. The grant will pay for paint, supplies and a sidewalk litter sweeper.

Now, it's about filling the gap between the hospital and the health center. It's a risk that business owners such as Cheplowitz say is worth taking in the long run.

"You have to go in with your eyes open," he said, "(and) know it's not going to be easy."

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