

A sneak peek at Scott Rohrman's proposed new look for Deep Ellum carved out of Main Street's historic storefronts

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Friday morning the city's Urban Design Peer Review Panel got a sneak peek at the future of Deep Ellum courtesy Scott Rohrman, the man who snapped up a sizable hunk of Deep Ellum -- 27 buildings and 13 parking lots -- last year. And it's a future, Rohrman says, that's deeply rooted in the historic neighborhood's past.

According to documents submitted to the city, Rohrman, under the auspices of his 42 Real Estate, is hoping to give a stretch of Main Street an extreme makeover with a master plan intended to create "a truly 'mixed-use' project integrating a diverse, mutually supportive combination of urban uses that include local/micro-retail, restaurants, services, walkway and seating into one continuous public realm to be used throughout all times of day and evening." Much of that redo will be confined to the 2600 and 2700 blocks of Main Street, between Good-Latimer Expressway and Crowds Street, with connections to Elm and Commerce.

The proposal, rendered by Droese Raney Architecture, divvies up the area into several pieces: The Alley (which connects Main and Elm), Radiator Plaza (a patio "at the front door of Main"), Atwell Garden ("an urban courtyard on a former surface parking lot"), The Corner (the connection to Commerce) and other amenities. In a perfect world, Rohrman says, the new development carved out of the original storefronts will be finished within 18 months. But there's a lot to do first, including fitting that stretch of Deep Ellum into the the 9-year-old Deep Ellum Tax Increment Financing District, which would let the city kick in for some of the proposal renovations. The council still has to OK the proposal, which we first reported last month.



"It's all subject to funding," Rohrman says. "We have some in place, not all. And I can't get it all in place until I get the city to bless what we're trying to do. If it comes together in an appropriate time frame, I'd love to see The Alley in place in 18 months or less. But I don't want to be one of those developers who promises the world to get people excited."

Rohrman says this redo is not dependent on TIF money. But, of course, every cent will help.

"We already bought the property," Rohrman says. "It's like I told Karl Stundins [in the Office of Economic Development]: We do everything bass-ackwards. I *should* have said, 'We won't buy it unless you give us TIF money.'" He laughs. "I did it the other way. I bought it and then went, 'Oh, OK.' I knew all along we'd need city's help to do what really needed to be done but if I did it before we closed, but we own the property, and we're going to improve the area regardless. Will we be able to improve it like the drawings show without help? We cannot do it to that level, and without help it won't be anywhere near as quick. But I own the property, so there's no going back."

The Main Street makeover is just another sign among many of Rohrman's Deep Ellum takeover.



Pecan Lodge is in one of his buildings; so too the coming Cold Beer Company, rising from the ashes of Vern's Place at the other end of Main. The stretch of Main housing Frank Campagna's beloved Kettle

Art gallery has already undergone its facelift. And the great Twilite Lounge on Elm Street, which just celebrated its one-year anniversary, is in a Rohrman-owned building.

Rohrman plans on repurposing and restoring the existing the storefronts, once considered endangered by Preservation Dallas. His is a stark contrast to a long-forgotten 2007 plan that would have polished and demolished much of the neighborhood's history.



"I had lunch with a well-known apartment developer today and he was chagrined to realize that this whole block of property is not available to be torn down for apartments," Rohrman says, laughing. "I don't mind that. That's what he does -- build apartments. I am not going to say we will never submit to the city to demolish a building in the future. We may. But the hope, the goal, the strategy is to keep them all. we came in with the intention of saving 100-year-old buildings. Sure, we want to make money too, but we went into this saying we want to save the old buildings."

Which may be one reason among many his plan was so well-received yesterday by the architects who make up the Urban Design Peer Review Panel.

"Hats off to the developer for agglomerating the parcels," said Larry Speck, an Austin-based architect and architecture professor. He praised the 42 Deep Ellum design: "I'm bowled over by this. It's going to make a huge, very positive difference" in Deep Ellum's future, said Speck, who proposed adding more street-side trees to the mix.

Dallas architect -- and beloved preservationist -- Marcel Quimby applauded Rohrman's efforts to retain the area's "quirkiness."

"It's delightful for someone to respect Deep Ellum for what it is," she said. "This is really exciting."

Paris Rutherford, a Dallas-based urban planner, wondered about the area's future parking needs. Rohrman said his investment group had purchased about a dozen parking lots with 350 spaces, and was exploring creation of a valet system that would park vehicles under the Interstate 345 overpass between Deep Ellum and downtown. He said construction of a parking garage with ground-floor retail was being considered.

Speck said he liked the idea of using vacant land or empty parking lots, but he urged Rohrman to forget valet parking because it "discourages pedestrian activity." Better to find a parking solution that requires people to walk in front of businesses, Speck said. "Valet kills downtown urban life."

"I just learned something. Thank you," Rohrman said, adding he had asked the city to issue no more valet permits in the area "until we figure this out."

"It's crawl, walk, run, and we're still crawling," Rohrman said hours after Friday morning's meeting. "But we're looking forward to walking and running."