

Ward 7 Progress, Uncertainty

Opening for Library, Ray's; Silence on Phase II

BY VIRGINIA AVNIEL SPATZ



LEFT to RIGHT

1. Owner Michael Landrum, bringing Ray's the Steaks to East River Park. Photo by Andrew Lightman
2. "Phase I," Department of Employment Services Headquarters, at Minnesota Avenue Metro Station, nears completion.



The new Benning Neighborhood Library is scheduled to open on April 5, but other elements in Ward 7's "new downtown," to be centered at the intersection of Minnesota Avenue and Benning Road NE, remain uncertain.

'Phase II' Uncertainties

The Donatelli/Blue Skye "Phase II" development on the northwest corner (residences with ground-floor retail) is slated to break ground in "Spring 2010." The community has not seen final plans, however, or heard in several months, from the developer for this property acquired by the District through eminent domain.

The Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED) convened a meeting to update the community on the related Minnesota Great Streets project in January but included no information or representation from Donatelli/Blue Skye.

Community members, including those on the Deanwood Task Force, expressed concern about this

omission. The Deanwood Task Force helped create the Small Area Plan (SAP), which was later adopted by the DC Council. The SAP relies substantially on plans for the Minnesota-Benning intersection to spur economic development in the neighborhood.

In addition, notes Cheryl Cort, policy director for the Coalition for Smarter Growth, it is crucial to Great Streets implementation that "Phase II" be in compliance with those plans, which were developed by with community input.

In response to January concerns, DMPED promised to convene a meeting for developers to share their plans with the community in "late February or early March." As of March 8, no such meeting had been scheduled.

District, Developer Silent

DMPED did not respond directly to queries about the promised meeting, and Sean Madigan, spokesperson for the mayor's office, had no information to share. A call to Donatelli Development was referred to Presi-

dent Chris Donatelli's e-mail. He did not respond to e-mailed queries.

Ward 7 Councilmember Yvette Alexander had been given no update by Donatelli or told by DMPED of a meeting to share final development plans. She did note, however, that the developer and ANC 7D had hammered out a Community Benefits Agreement last fall.

"I think what is happening is that people – including Ayris Scales, who was project manager – are no longer on the [DMPED] team," Alexander said in early March, adding that she would look into the lack of communication.

"They don't bother with stakeholders," says Wanda Aikens, of the Ward 7 Arts Collaborative. She is disappointed with the councilmember as well as DMPED and the developer. "They only bring us in at the 11th hour, when it's too late to have any meaningful input."

Based on experiences in other parts of the city, Cort is concerned that developers and community members be allowed enough time smooth out any problems before con-

struction begins. "A meeting should happen sooner rather than later."

Nearby Progress

The Department of Employment Services (DOES) building, between the Metro station and "Phase II," is nearing completion and scheduled to open "Winter 2010," according to the District's Office of Planning, and "shortly," according to Alexander.

The long-awaited opening of Ray's restaurant in City Interest's East River Park was purportedly imminent at press time. Local hiring and permitting were in process, but owner Michael Landrum had not yet set a date for the opening. It is expected to coincide roughly with the opening of the new library – situated across the shopping center parking lot – in early April.

Benning Neighborhood Library's two-story 22,000-square-foot facility will offer separate reading areas for adults, teens and children as well as a large meeting room and a smaller conference room. Materials will include 88,000 books as well as CDs and DVDs. In addition to 32 public access computers, the library will have 20 laptop computers and free Wi-Fi.

Alexander notes her hope that the opening will spur renewed energy in a Friends of the Benning Library group. "Friends play a major role for community to be involved and, if need be, help with fundraising."

For information about opening festivities, contact Archie Williams, 202-727-1437 or archie.williams@dc.gov. ★

Interim Library Closing

To make way for the new library, the interim location at 4101 Benning Road NE will close March 13. During the transition to the new location, library users can return books to any other DC Public Library location and renew books online at dclibrary.org. The library closest to the Benning Neighborhood Library is the Capitol View Neighborhood Library at 5001 Central Ave. SE.