



## The Birmingham News

### Downtown hosts hip bars, eateries; more planned

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As 5 p.m. approaches and commuters fight their way through rush-hour gridlock, some residents of Birmingham's Loft District can be sipping cocktails in a chic urban bar or meeting their neighbors for cheeseburgers at a cozy pub, all within walking distance of their homes.

An emerging entertainment area has come to life among Birmingham's lofts, bringing evening eating and entertainment options to Morris, First, Second and Third avenues, mostly between 20th and 24th streets.

The Wine Loft, Steel Urban Lounge and Matthew's Bar and Grill all opened in the past 18 months within blocks of each other on First and Morris avenues. The new gathering places joined Safari Cup, Metro Bistro & Market, and other established businesses in the area.

Residents and proprietors say the loft entertainment district is in the beginning phases, although it is already pulling people from Lakeview and suburban pubs and lounges.

"It is going to come faster than people think," said Gary Dale, one of three principles behind the New Vulcan Ale House, expected to open in late spring in the old Jimmie Hale Mission building on Third Avenue. "This is an interesting little district. There will be more and more things happening."

Camille Spratling, president of the Central City Neighborhood Association and a loft resident, could not be happier with the additions to her neighborhood. When she moved to the district three years ago, she said she realized immediately that she was living in a special place. Although evening entertainment options were limited at the time, the community improvised with loft parties and other social gatherings where the entire neighborhood - black, white, young, old - would be invited.

As businesses recognize the potential of historic buildings and the growing residential population, Spratling and her neighbors have taken a personal responsibility to protect the integrity of their community. The neighborhood association scrutinizes every new business license application in the area, she said.

"We are meticulous," Spratling said. "We love our neighborhood so much. We care deeply about it so we show probably more interest than the average citizen might."

#### **In walking distance:**

They want the businesses, like a coffee shop with Saturday morning hours, a restaurant offering good pasta on Friday night or a hip, fun place to meet friends on Wednesday nights for beer or a glass of wine - all within walking distance of home.

But they don't want businesses that will potentially hurt property values and draw unsavory crowds.

The group successfully lobbied last year to shut down The Screening Room at 2130 Second Ave. South, which operated an adult theater and sold adult entertainment videos. The city revoked the business license for alleged illegal activity.

Matthew "Kavon" Fanaei remembers getting those tough questions from the neighborhood association when he opened Matthew's Bar and Grill on Morris Avenue. While it was frustrating at the time, Fanaei said, he has grown to appreciate the people who want to protect the neighborhood, especially since he has millions of dollars invested in three properties.

"I'm 24 so when I was trying to get my business license, my age was a factor," he said. "They thought I was going to open up a dance club or something. But that wasn't what I wanted. We were looking for young professionals, 25 and up. You can do a lot of business doing things for young crowds, but that takes a much bigger risk."

#### **Different clientele:**

Fanaei has become just as picky as the neighborhood association, he said. Although he says plenty of businesses have inquired about leasing space in his First Avenue buildings, they did not meet Fanaei's standards.

At least one club, Zen on Morris Avenue, caters to a younger crowd.

"It is just one of those places where it doesn't fit in the mix, but it is a nice place," Fanaei said. "I don't mind it. They have their late-night license where they stay open all night. It is nice to have a place where you are not worrying about last call."

More businesses will draw more people to the district, Fanaei said, and that helps all of the owners.

Mike Dunnivant and his son, Mick Dunnivant, opened the Wine Loft in early 2007, and have drawn the crowd they wanted - professionals. The Dunnivants set a dress code that calls for business attire.

"That is part of trying to keep a professional crowd," Mike Dunnivant said. "That is our image, the nonsmoking professional crowd. We get a lot of positive feedback for having that environment."

Downtown has struggled with a reputation of crime. And many of the new businesses in the Loft District are still separated by vacant-looking buildings and deserted sidewalks.

But the scene has drastically changed in recent years, said Joy Myers, director of Birmingham Artwalk, which has been held in the Loft District for nearly seven years.

#### **'A wonderful change':**

The annual event, held the weekend after Labor Day, has lured visitors to the Loft District for years. In the beginning, there were so few restaurants and bars that outside vendors were needed to supply refreshments.

"But now there are several locations to get something to eat, adult beverages and all of that," she said. "It has been a wonderful change."

Businesses without evening hours and alcohol, such as the new Urban Standard, which serves coffee, breakfast and lunch, also have added to the neighborhood, she said. The business is even considering late hours in the coming months because of demand.

Dunnivant said the slowing real estate market has inhibited the district's growth, since most businesses want residents in place before opening. But it has not stopped it, he said.

Andre Natta, a blogger and resident of the Loft District, has helped announce the new changes to the neighborhood on his site, [www.bhamterminal.com](http://www.bhamterminal.com). When he moved to the area in 2004, he saw the potential.

"I want to live in the area of town where things are about to happen, well really, where things are already happening," he said. "It is just getting everybody else to see it."

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