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## Reinforcing the brand

*(by Kara Krekeler - October 26, 2010)*

Earlier this year, Central West End stakeholders successfully formed a community improvement district to provide tax revenue to support security, beautification and marketing efforts in the district, which is centered on Euclid Avenue between Lindell Boulevard and Washington Avenue.

To handle the marketing aspect of the CID, the CID board of commissioners in October hired Dovetail, a Maryland Plaza-based strategic marketing firm. CID commissioner Jim Dwyer said that because the partnership with Dovetail just began, the specifics of the marketing campaign have yet to be ironed out and “the details will unfold over time.”

First on the agenda, however, is focusing on drawing more visitors during the holiday season. Jeff Stein of Dovetail said businesses within the CID are being asked to participate in a window decoration contest over the holidays, while Dwyer said that the neighborhood will “ratchet up” the regular holiday decorations in public areas.

Beyond the end of the year, however, the CWE CID’s marketing plans are up in the air. Dwyer said that much of the work would likely center on advertising, promotions and neighborhood-specific events or decorating themes.

“On the surface, we have recognized that we’re in competition with a number of other districts, but we’re each unique,” Dwyer said. “Our job is to capitalize on those things that make the Central West End unique and make sure the Central West End is the first place people think of. The idea is to make this an even more desirable destination.”

But whatever the CID commissioners and Dovetail come up with, CWE residents and visitors shouldn’t expect a change to the neighborhood’s logos or overall brand.

The volunteer-driven Central West End Association “has done well with herding cats and getting people involved” with branding the area, and Dovetail and the CID have no intention of overhauling what the CWEA has accomplished, Stein said. Instead, Dovetail has already begun reaching out to the CWEA and CWE residents to determine how exactly to proceed with marketing the eclectic district using the foundation of what the CWEA has already built.

“The Central West End already has a brand. People already have a notion of what the reputation is,” Stein said. “Our job is to create more volume and show off the width and breadth of what it has to offer.”

### Growing in The Grove

The Central West End, however, is one of several local neighborhoods to handle marketing from a districtwide approach and many of those neighborhoods’ stakeholders are also trying to showcase the eclectic offerings of their business districts.

The Grove neighborhood is a year into its own CID, which, much like the Central West End’s CID, provides funding for beautification, increased security and marketing. The 1 percent tax has allowed the district to create a brochure and a marketing toolkit, as well as reach out to the CVC.

It’s also helped define the neighborhood and give it more structure to get projects done, said Chip Schloss, owner of the Atomic Cowboy. One of those projects — a \$3 million streetscape beautification project that includes new lighting, trees and sidewalk furniture — is scheduled to be finished in early 2011.

“We just want to provide a good experience. If you attend something here and have a good safe time, maybe you’ll come back,” Schloss said.

Districtwide marketing and branding efforts were well under way before The Grove instituted its CID, however, starting five years ago when Schloss and Mangrove Redevelopment owner Guy Slay decided to redub the area formerly known as Forest Park Southeast “The Grove.”

Getting the name out has been a slow process, starting with its inclusion in a press release for Venus Envy, a women’s art and culture show that Atomic Cowboy hosted not long after it opened.

“It helped propel the name of the neighborhood through the process of inviting the press to call it The Grove,” Schloss said, adding

that the creation of a signature annual event, GroveFest, has also helped. GroveFest celebrated its fifth year in September.

Schloss said that the district's branding "has been going amazingly well considering the short period of time that the bulk of the work has been done."

"We're not as sophisticated or endowed financially as well as the Loop or Central West End, but we have a lot of people facilitating the neighborhood and willing to role their sleeves up. That's the sweet spot," Schloss said.

Until recently, however, several people had trouble connecting the name with the location. But in October, a 24-foot sign was installed over Manchester just west of Vandeventer, making the connection much easier to grasp.

"People were confused but now with the sign you can't miss The Grove," said Brooks Goedecker of Washington University Medical Center. WUMC helped fund the sign and has taken an active role in revitalizing the neighborhood. Goedecker added that during the sign's installation, he overheard several people saying, "So *that's* where The Grove is."

The sign's design, which features a yellow-rimmed sunburst over the words, "The Grove," is echoed in a logo that several Grove-based businesses have been using over the past couple of years. Goedecker said that before being installed in October, the sign was in the works for two years as stakeholders designed and then raised money for the project; businesses began using the logo in anticipation of the sign's arrival.

### **'Brighter and happier'**

Throughout The Grove's revitalization, Schloss has looked to another neighborhood as inspiration.

"I had visions that the Atomic Cowboy would be the Blueberry Hill of The Grove," Schloss said, referring to the fact that both Atomic Cowboy and Blueberry Hill moved into their neighborhoods before it was hip to do so. Schloss said that when Atomic Cowboy opened five years ago a lot of people questioned his choice of location.

Since then, Schloss has "taken a play out of [Blueberry Hill owner] Joe Edwards' book and nurtured other businesses when they open," Schloss said.

Schloss said that in many neighborhoods, bar owners open up shop and then keep to themselves. But Schloss said that rather than spurn potential newcomers as competition, businesses in up-and-coming neighborhoods need to support one another. He said that Everest Café and Bar, which is across the street from Atomic Cowboy, has provided more customers for his business and vice versa.

The situation was similar for Edwards when he opened Blueberry Hill in 1972. Edwards said that, not long after moving into the Loop, he helped form the district's first loose-knit merchant's association to support one another and improve the neighborhood.

In 1980, that organization was formalized as the Loop Special Business District, which imposed a sales tax in the area that would be used to fund marketing, as well as lighting, beautification efforts and other neighborhood improvements.

Edwards said that to best utilize neighborhood marketing programs, business districts need to start by getting a feel for the area and what's needed to make it more attractive to visitors.

"You have to observe human nature," he said, citing less noticeable amenities like regular trash receptacles as something that helps keep the Loop cleaner. "I just look at the Loop and think about what would make it brighter and happier."

Edwards said that in those early days it was key to not spend the tax revenue on marketing. While doing so would likely have helped bring people into the district, they would have found a dark, gloomy neighborhood filled with litter, which would have deterred future visits, Edwards said. Instead, he fought to implement permanent changes in the area that would help draw in new businesses.

"After we got the businesses in, then we could start marketing," he said.

Much like the marketing approaches in the Central West End and The Grove, marketing in the Loop today focuses on the variety of businesses, activities and attractions — such as the Loop PlanetWalk and the St. Louis Walk of Fame — as well as promoting events that are held either by individual businesses or collectively, such as the annual Loop Ice Carnival.

"The Loop is built up with unique businesses, so we focus on that and we work with the Convention and Visitors Commission to let them know what's up and coming," Edwards said. "We just keep emphasizing the positive and the new projects coming along."

Among those upcoming projects are the long-discussed Loop Trolley and a statue of Chuck Berry that will be erected in early 2011.

## **A different focus**

As in the other districts, Grand Center's marketing and branding efforts are centered on showcasing the area's attractions and events. But unlike the Central West End, the Loop and The Grove, Grand Center is anchored by its many arts organizations and districtwide marketing falls under the purview of a nonprofit organization, Grand Center Inc.

Kelly Weber, director of events and marketing for Grand Center Inc., said that, as a nonprofit, Grand Center Inc. doesn't have much of a budget for marketing the district. Instead, she focuses on bringing the many organizations within the district together to promote the area.

"Grand Center Inc. does take a leadership role in making the district cohesive," Weber said. "We put our energy into branding the physical district and providing information about everyone in the district. There's a cohesiveness of information and that's key to the branding campaign."

Among the ways that goal is accomplished are hanging banners on light poles; hosting information about all of the organizations on the Grand Center Inc. website; producing a monthly event calendar that's mailed out, given to concierges and distributed throughout the district; and by coordinating collaborative advertising in local publications. Grand Center Inc. also spearheads Grand Center's annual events, First Night and Dancing in the Streets.

Weber said that, given the nonprofit's limited marketing budget, she doesn't anticipate any major changes in the way Grand Center markets itself in the future. However, Grand Center Inc. will be launching a more interactive website next year and Weber said she plans to continue the Thursdays @ The Intersection events that started over the summer.

For the past several years, Grand Center has billed itself as "The Intersection of Art and Life." Weber said that the branding campaign "hits the right note" and is designed to also someday go beyond "art and life" as more housing and dining options move into the neighborhood.

"The whole idea of branding is that it expands as the district expands," Weber said. "We're trying to work in partnership with the other people in Grand Center to think about other reasons people come here than to see a show."

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