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Plans call for Triangle to become West Seattle gateway

By Eric Pryne
Seattle Times business reporter

The Triangle is the first neighborhood you come to in West Seattle after crossing the bridge and climbing up Fauntleroy Way Southwest.

But it serves more as West Seattle's workshop than its entry hall.

Auto-repair shops and lumber warehouses dominate the eight-block area bounded by Fauntleroy, 35th Avenue Southwest and Southwest Alaska Street, giving it a gritty, utilitarian feel.

"You're kind of going around forklifts and things like that," says Susan Melrose, director of a business association in West Seattle's "downtown" a few blocks away.

Aside from one retirement complex, nothing new has been built in the Triangle since the popular West Seattle YMCA complex in 1984.

But that long slumber should end later this month, when longtime Seattle developer Harbor Properties plans to break ground on a six-story, 200-unit apartment project it calls Link.

More projects will follow, predict property owners, neighbors and city officials. "This is step one," says Denny Onslow, Harbor's chief development officer.

Step Two could be a five-story apartment building on property owned by the Huling family on 35th. A city design review board will consider it Nov. 19.

The city set the stage for redevelopment in the Triangle a decade ago when it included the area in the West Seattle Junction "urban village," a major focus for growth. Change seems more imminent now — partly because of a big investment by King County Metro, partly because of the demise of a major Triangle business.

So, over the past year or two, residents and businesses in and around the Triangle have developed a vision of what they think the area should become: a leafy, walkable, transit-oriented, mostly



JOHN LOK / THE SEATTLE TIMES
This view of the Triangle neighborhood is looking to the east. Alaska Avenue is on the right. Fauntleroy Way Southwest is at the bottom.



JOHN LOK / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Denny Onslow with Harbor Properties stands on the site where the company plans to erect an apartment complex.

residential neighborhood that stands out as a real gateway to West Seattle.

Now city planners are developing recommendations to help make that vision real when the recession ends and the developers arrive.

"It's very much a neighborhood in transition," says Sharonn Meeks, who lives in the Fairmount neighborhood just to the south.

Holes to fill

That transition won't come all at once. Jim Sweeney, for one, has no intention of leaving.

He's the Triangle's largest property owner. His business, Alki Lumber, has been a neighborhood landmark for 80 years.

Seattle boasted 130 lumberyards 40 ago, Sweeney says. Now Alki is one of the few survivors.

"As long as it's viable, it'll stay," he vows.

But he says he doesn't feel threatened by all the talk of redevelopment. In fact, he sold Harbor Properties some of the land for Link.

Harbor, founded 80 years ago, probably is best known for Harbor Steps, the luxury downtown residential and retail complex it built in the early 1990s around a public plaza and grand staircase linking First and Western avenues.

Many credit the project with helping to revive downtown.

In recent years the company has focused on more modest apartment projects, including Mural in the West Seattle Junction. Tenants began moving in earlier this year; Onslow says that project's success help persuade Harbor to press ahead with Link.

But Harbor also elected not to exercise its option to buy the aging Seattle West motel, another Triangle property where it had planned to build another apartment complex.

Considering the economy, "we decided that right now it was better for us to do one project than two," Onslow says.

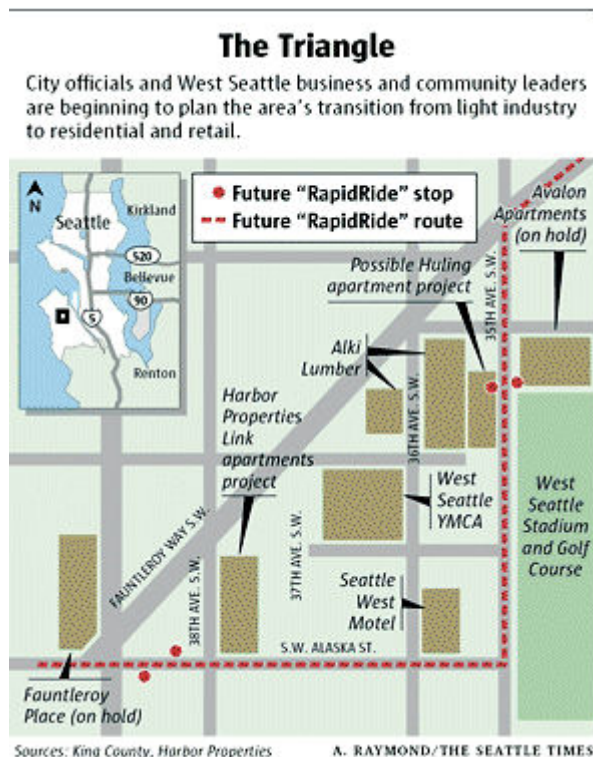
Monuments to the real-estate downturn surround the Triangle. A deep, empty hole on the northwest corner of Alaska and Fauntleroy was supposed to become Fauntleroy Place, a complex with a Whole Foods Market and 184 apartments. Work stopped a year ago.

Also on hold: a half-built, six-story apartment building at 35th and Southwest Avalon that was one of bankrupt real-estate magnate Michael Mastro's dozens of properties.

But Onslow, Meeks, City Councilman Tom Rasmussen and others maintain the Triangle will draw more developer interest once the recession ends, for at least two reasons.

First, there's plenty of available land: The Huling Brothers auto dealerships that once lined Fauntleroy closed their doors two years ago. The showrooms and car lots still sit mostly vacant.

Second, King County Metro plans to open a "RapidRide" line — bus service with the frequency and many features of light rail — between West Seattle and downtown in 2012. Two stations will serve the Triangle.



RapidRide figured prominently in Harbor Properties' planning for Link. Onslow says the company plans to install an electronic kiosk in the lobby with real-time information on the next bus's arrival time.

Harbor also is betting the city will ease parking requirements in response to RapidRide; the developer is providing fewer stalls in the complex than the code now requires. For now, the rest will be provided at parking lots on other properties the company owns nearby.

Green streets?

Harbor played a big role in developing the new vision for the Triangle. In early 2008 it retained Hewitt Architects to come up with some ideas for the neighborhood — "to prime the pump," Onslow says — then shared them with neighboring residents and businesses.

They liked most of what they saw. "Harbor Properties is in sync with what I hear the community wanting," says Councilman Rasmussen, a West Seattle resident.

The city "urban-design strategy" for the Triangle that's now in the works may propose designating some Triangle streets as "green streets" that give priority to pedestrians and bicycles but remain open to cars.

It also will propose ways to improve pedestrian connections between the Triangle, the Junction to the west and parks to the east. Dave Montoure, a former president of the Junction Association, says maybe traffic lanes should be eliminated on busy Fauntleroy Way to make the crossing less intimidating.

Meeks would like to see a community building in the Triangle. The area also needs more green space, she says.

Robert Scully, in charge of the city effort, says a report should be ready in about six months.

Residents and businesses also hope planners will address some challenges that face the Triangle now.

The YMCA's expansion, for one: "We run out of space at times," says Josh Sutton, its executive director. "We've developed our block as much as we can."

One possible solution: leasing ground-floor commercial space in new apartment buildings as the Triangle redevelops.

Then there's parking. Commuters already drive to the area, park on the streets and take buses downtown. Alki Lumber's Sweeney fears the problem will only get worse when RapidRide arrives.

But Meeks, for one, sees more promise than peril in the Triangle's transformation. "Change is coming," she says. "I just think we have a real unique opportunity here."

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