



## 'Midtown Mile'

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## atlanta news

## Demolished gay bars make way for Midtown's future

Phoenix for sale; fence limits Ansley Square bars

By RYAN LEE

The future of Midtown Atlanta is currently being built on top of the rubble of the neighborhood's gay past.

Several marquee nightclubs that gay men and lesbians flocked to for three decades — venues that owners credit with instilling a sense of belonging in young gay people, as well as helping Midtown transform from dilapidated to highly desirable — were razed in 2006, and now serve as the building foundation for two development projects city leaders hope will elevate Atlanta to a level of cosmopolitan living comparable to New York and Chicago.

For 30 years, Backstreet Atlanta, a 24-hour gay club, occupied the space at 845 Peachtree St. Atlanta police officers padlocked the club for good in July 2004, after Backstreet owner Vicki Vara lost a series of lengthy legal challenges to city ordinances targeting Backstreet and other 24-hour clubs.

Vara sold the plot of land that Backstreet called home to the Novare Group in June 2005 for \$1.7 million, according to the Fulton County Tax Assessor's office.

The Novare Group, which built the gay-popular Metropolis and Spire condo towers along Peachtree Street, is erecting a 36-story mixed use tower of cutting-edge condos positioned above trendy retail stores at the former Backstreet location.

The first phase of the tower, known as ViewPoint, is expected to be complete by summer of 2008, said Novare spokesperson Cathy Wooten.

ViewPoint is one of the latest additions to a 14-block development project along Peachtree Street that is intended to upgrade the heart of the city. From North Avenue to 15th Street, city planners envision Peachtree Street evolving into Atlanta's "Midtown Mile" — an extended stretch of luxurious office towers, condos and retail shops intended to be comparable to Chicago's "Magnificent Mile" and Madison Avenue in New York City.

Vara considers the mainstreaming of Midtown at the expense of gay institutions like Backstreet to be almost sacrilegious,



Out with the old, in with the new. Former gay bars like Backstreet and Metro Video Bar were torn down in 2006 to make way for mixed-used towers like ViewPoint (lower right) and 1010 Midtown (upper left).

"comparable to politicians waltzing into Ebenezer Baptist Church and pronouncing the building had to be demolished for the sake of progress and moving forward."

"Where will we gather to join ranks when the world places yet another hurdle in our path?" Vara said shortly after Backstreet was closed in the summer of 2005. She added that she was disappointed by "the apparent apathy of our brothers and sisters in this community as the elected, and appointed, city officials successfully railroaded new rules and ordinances into place, slicing out the very heart and soul of the roots of our freedom to express ourselves and gather with members of our 'family.'"

But not all gay Midtown residents mourn the replacement of gay nightclubs with a string of condo and retail towers.

"The plans for 12th & Midtown and ViewPoint provide for very high-quality residential and retail development that brings new life and uses to these underutilized blocks of real estate," said Will Herbig, director of urban design for the Midtown Alliance, which is spearheading the "Midtown Mile" project.

## 'Midtown Mile' on the way

Like Backstreet, the Metro Video Bar, located at 1080 Peachtree St., had a reputation as a place where drug use was frequent. And like Backstreet, the Metro was

targeted for closure by neighborhood activists and city officials, forced to shutter its doors by the Atlanta Police Department and eventually sold to elite development firms.

The Daniel Corporation and Selig Enterprises now own the land on which the Metro sat for almost 15 years, and are constructing 1010 Midtown, a 35-story mixed-use tower.

The Fulton County Tax Assessor's office has no records on the purchase price of 1080 Peachtree St., and officials with the Daniel Corporation and Selig Enterprises were unavailable for comment by press time. Former Metro owner Don Hunnewell declined an interview request.

The 1010 Midtown high-rise is part of the burgeoning 12th & Midtown complex — a 2.5-million-square-foot mix of condos, office space, luxury hotels and retail shops.

The massive project will help anchor the northern end of the "Midtown Mile," which was launched during a Midtown Alliance meeting in December 2005. A "Who's Who" list of Atlanta development firms are lined-up behind the "Midtown Mile" — including the Novare Group, Selig Enterprises, Loudermilk-Rohrig and Cousins Properties.

"The Midtown Mile represents our



The Phoenix on Ponce de Leon has been closed since late 2006, and is now up for sale.

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## 'Midtown Mile' compared to gay enclaves in other cities

DEVELOPMENT, continued from Page 5

vision for a retail destination that is on par with the world's best shopping streets — an authentic, urban shopping district along Peachtree Street featuring upscale, national and international retailers," said Herbig, who is gay.

All of the mainstream promotional literature produced for the "Midtown Mile" touts the future corridor as Atlanta's equivalent to Chicago's "Magnificent Mile," but

Herbig said it will make Midtown more like other notable gay enclaves.

"Existing retailers along and adjacent to the Midtown Mile, many of them gay-owned businesses, are thriving and have helped prove the viability of this market," Herbig said. "12th & Midtown and ViewPoint will build upon their success by helping us raise the bar even further in terms of attracting flagship retail brands that will make the Midtown Mile a great place for residents and visitors to shop —

a district on par with Miami's Lincoln Road Mall, Chicago's North Halsted and Chelsea's Eighth Avenue."

One of the last gay bars located on Peachtree Street in Midtown is Bulldogs, which will soon be sandwiched between ViewPoint to the south and Metropolis to the north. Owner Michael Clutter is unsure how or if Bulldogs fits into the "Midtown Mile" master plan, but said he doesn't worry about being forced off his land on 7th and Peachtree Street.

"Obviously, there'll come a point where one of those [condo towers] are going to take over our block, but I don't see why we couldn't be located in the lobby or something like that," said Clutter, who added that he sometimes misses the gay bars that used to neighbor Bulldogs.

"I especially miss Backstreet," Clutter said. "It was kind of an Atlanta landmark."

## Phoenix on the market

The Phoenix on Ponce de Leon Avenue was another gay bar embroiled in a lawsuit with the city after neighborhood groups and city officials moved to shut the bar down in 2006. But attempts to keep the 18-year-old gay bar open were scuttled when Phoenix operator Arlene Riley died of cancer last November.

Currently outside the Phoenix, multiple large "for sale" signs hype the property as having unlimited potential for developers.

"[The] sky's the limit with this [property]," said Jonathan Abney, a real estate agent with Square Properties, which is selling the Phoenix and an adjacent piece of land for a listed price of \$2.5 million.

Small business owners and major developers have expressed interest in converting the former Phoenix location into everything from retail and residential mixed-use developments, to office and medical space, Abney said.

"There's amazing potential for this property," said Abney, who added that the Phoenix property is zoned for mixed-use development.

Meanwhile, a battle between a powerful Atlanta developer and city officials has recently wreaked havoc on yet another gay bar in Midtown. Developer Wayne Mason owns a stretch of Midtown land needed by city officials to complete the much-ballyhooed Beltline — a proposed 22-mile ring within the city of walkways, recreational areas, public transportation, shopping outlets and residential complexes.

Mason's land includes Ansley Square near Piedmont Avenue and Monroe Drive, a shopping complex that is home to three gay bars and several other gay businesses. Mason backed out of a proposal to donate his land to the city for its Beltline project after the city refused to loosen zoning restrictions for Mason's other properties.

Earlier this year, Mason erected a fence that cut through the parking lot of Ansley Square in a move that some considered the developer thumbing his nose at city officials. Whatever Mason's intent, the fence impacted the bottom lines of gay bars at Ansley Square by limiting available parking, said Steve Tallas, a manager at the gay bar Burkhart's.

"We've felt it to a tune of about a 10 percent decrease in sales," said Tallas, who added that the bar recently received a letter from the Ansley Square operators saying the shopping complex reached an agreement with Mason to remove the fence soon.

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