

For Thayer Street, changes in store

By Justin Sayles, Staff Writer



Dinner Anyone? More eateries have infiltrated Thayer Street in Providence, changing the face of the retail district. Earlier this month, the street received designation as a business improvement district, allowing it to receive capital improvement funds.

Dining replaces retail as independents leave

In 15 years of doing business, it's almost come to represent its environment – quirky, artsy and stylish. But after a successful run on the East Side, OOP! announced this month that it will be closing its Thayer Street location. David Riordan, who co-owns the store with his wife, Jennifer Neuguth, said they're shutting down because they couldn't reach an agreement with their landlord to buy the building, and they're shifting toward more corporate sales.

They're keeping their Providence Place store, he said, and will find another East Side site. Still, by leaving Thayer Street, the eclectic gift gallery joins a long list of independent retail shops that have shut their doors in the district.

"There is a transition going on," said Kenneth R. Dulgarian, who has owned commercial and residential property on and around Thayer Street for more than 30 years. "[You] can look at that as a positive or a negative. I look at it as a positive. The reason for the transition is purely attributable to demand – consumer demand."

That consumer demand, which Dulgarian said has led people to shop online and at big-box stores, has claimed several of the street's anchors in recent years. The College Hill Bookstore, which was owned by Dulgarian, shut down in 2004 after operating for 40 years. That announcement came on the heels of other store closings, including In Your Ear Records, the Savage Bros. skate shop and the Garment District.

Even the street's most visible chain store, The Gap, closed its doors around that time. And Riordan noted that of four music shops in the district, only Tom's Tracks remains. Longtime patrons of the old stores have been displeased. "It's part of inertia," Dulgarian said. "People want to stay with the same thing. But growth is moving forward."

Donald C. Eversley, president of the Providence Economic Development Partnership, said he doesn't see OOP!'s exit from Thayer Street as a sign of the district starting to lag, but the area has been losing retail to eateries. In many ways, Thayer Street has become an "outdoor food court" for Brown University, Eversley said.

This month, Thayer Street merchants got a boost from the Providence City Council: formal designation as a business improvement district. Combined with donations from Brown, the designation will provide \$750,000 for capital improvements. In addition, a special tax assessment will be collected from commercial property owners to maintain the upgrades. Improvements are slated to include landscape architecture work, graffiti removal and new lighting. Eversley said parking should also be examined.

"The business improvement district is tremendously important," Eversley said, "because the whole street does warrant a fresh look as to what we can do. . . . The property owners and other stakeholders like the university are recognizing that they have to be a bit more strategic."

Councilwoman Rita Williams, whose Ward Two includes Thayer Street from Angell Street to Hope Street, said the district is thriving despite the exit of some of its marquee stores.

While she called OOP!'s exit from Thayer Street a loss, she said the store's landlord, Stephen Lewinstein, has generally fared well in all of his ventures on the street. She expects him to bring a high-quality business into the location.

Riordan said Lewinstein has not told the OOP! owners what his plans are for the location, but he hopes it won't be another restaurant.

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