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LOCAL

Naples Design District makes quick comeback from Hurricane Ian



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The Design District has bounced back from Hurricane Ian. Most of the damage has been repaired. Redevelopment continues.

It's come a long way since the storm flooded and uprooted many of its businesses. Nearly all of the businesses are up and running again. However, some have changed or won't return.

The district, known for its eclectic mix of local shops, restaurants, galleries and design studios, saw significant flooding from Ian's unprecedented storm surge in September.

Located to the east and the north of U.S. 41, to the west of Goodlette-Frank Road, and to the south of Seventh Avenue North, the area sits only about a mile from the beach. It spans more than 200 acres.

The Naples Design District Association has nearly 70 members. It's only lost a few of its members since Ian hit.

"People want to stay here. Yes, they sustained damages, but they are excited about our future," said Elizabeth Kurtz Isbell, the association's president.

New additions since the hurricane include home decor retailer Feelathom and the Forever Fiore Tea Lounge. Waterworks is another.

The Amy Art Gallery has announced plans to move into a larger space on First Avenue South. Its 10th Street location has already closed, in preparation for the move.

In case you missed it: Visionary plan for Design District in Naples nears final approval

Some big changes in the district

A few of the district's members are still in recovery mode.

That includes The Naples Depot Museum, set in a restored Seaboard Air Line Railway passenger station, off Fifth Avenue South. The historic museum, owned and operated by Collier County, is under repair.

The Wine Store, off Central Avenue, remains closed. As it undergoes a renovation forced by Ian, it's selling full cases of wine for curbside pick-up and delivery, via phone and online.

Since Ian, The Republic of Decor retail store has shut its doors, with its owner now focused on interior design services, and plotting his next steps.

Feil, a luxury wood flooring company, has also left, but continues to serve Southwest Florida through its showroom in Fort Myers.

The Striped Cabana on Fifth Avenue North still sits dark.

After a brief interruption by Ian, construction resumed on an AC Hotel by Marriott, a Warren American Whiskey Kitchen and a new Gulfshore Playhouse.

The new \$66 million cultural arts center will provide a Broadway-style theatrical experience. It's expected to generate \$20 million in benefits to the local economy a year.

Plans for a three-story, four-level public garage, with more than 360 parking spaces, off First Avenue South near the playhouse, are marching forward. The city's Planning Advisory recently voted in favor of the site plan, and City Council is scheduled to take final action on June 5.

The garage will include 123 dedicated spots for the playhouse.

"Gulfshore Playhouse, I mean, that is going to be just the cultural staple here," Isbell remarked. "And especially with that new garage that is coming at the same time."

An official opening is slated for October 2024.

"As of now, the steel has been installed, the grand staircase has been installed, the floors are going in, and before too long we'll be enclosing the building with glass," said Rachel Applegate, chief marketing officer.

Meanwhile, other parts of the Naples Square planned development continue to evolve, with more commercial projects in the works, including a new restaurant. The development's luxury condos, built in phases, are sold out.

More: Visionary plan for Design District in Naples nears final approval

And: Naples Design District continues to evolve, as it awaits new master plan

Ian created a stronger bond

If anything, Ian created an even stronger bond in the Design District, Isbell said.

"After COVID and everything the country has been through since then, we have been through a lot," she said. "But every time we stand back up and move forward."

For many years, the targeted redevelopment area carried the name 41-10 for its location between U.S. 41 North and 10th Street, but it branded itself as the Design District a few years ago.

Last June, City Council, sitting as the Community Redevelopment Agency, approved a new masterplan for the area, created by world-renowned urban planner DPZ CoDesign, with public input. The three goals are to:

Build on the existing strengths by ensuring improvements and redevelopment are consistent with the neighborhood's existing small-town character and urban fabric

Encourage new business opportunities, while preserving the existing affordable housing stock

Foster policies and regulations that serve a multi-generational population, especially the "young-at-heart"

The visionary plan has been described as a living, breathing document that can be adjusted over time as new issues or opportunities arise.

Since the hurricane, streetscapes have been enhanced with new landscaping – planned before Ian.

More visual improvements are on the way, including new street art and banners.

One of DPZ CoDesign's big ideas is to bring the alleyways to life, so that they become walkable public spaces for dining, entertainment and art.

In April, City Council, sitting as the Community Redevelopment Agency, supported recommendations from its advisory board to undertake pilot projects, including an alleyway activation between First Avenue South and Central Avenue.

Council directed city staff to talk to business owners and come back with concepts for implementation.

The Community Redevelopment Agency's budget includes \$1.5 million for capital improvements to the district this fiscal year.

"We love the future of this district," Isbell said.

A show of resilience

Despite Ian's wrath, it didn't take long for the district's members to get back on their feet. The district hosted a "Sip and Shop" event in mid-February, shuttling patrons between its stores, galleries and restaurants on Slidrs, highlighting its myriad offerings and how far it had come since the storm.

When the district held a special event on March 1 to commemorate Naples' 100-year anniversary, most of its members were back in business. Method & Concept chose that day for a grand reopening of its contemporary art gallery and design studio, and an unveiling of its rebuilt sculpture garden at 10th Street South and Second Avenue South, ravaged by Ian.

The day Ian hit, Chad Jensen, the gallery's creative director and managing partner, said security cameras showed more than 3 feet of water rising outside of the windows, and when he visited the next day, he found 1 foot of water standing inside.

At first, the task of rebuilding seemed daunting, with all of the cabinetry and other millwork, from doors to shelving, destroyed.

"It was quite a monumental task. It was like starting over again in the gallery. It felt like day one," Jensen lamented.

His business is located in The Collective, a three-story design hub. All of the tenants on the first floor saw the same kind of flooding from Ian. The building's elevator still isn't fixed.

While Jensen loves the camaraderie and creative vibe in the Design District, he acknowledged there are serious issues within its borders from stormwater management and traffic congestion to the lack of affordable housing. He hopes to see the city address those issues in short order.

Stuart Sheppard, founder of GWT Outdoors, a luxury boutique with a focus on outdoor living, moved back into his showroom in February, then hosted a grand reopening in March. His business is also located on the first floor of The Collective.

Like Jensen, he saw a few feet of water rush into his storefront.

"It didn't hurt any of our displays. The products we sell are hurricane rated and they are meant for outdoor use ... But all of our furniture got hit, all of the appliances, all of the sheetrock had to be replaced," Sheppard said.

The rebuild included replacing every electrical outlet and an entire bathroom, he said.

"We got a whole lot of problems. It wasn't good. Put it that way," Sheppard explained.

He lives close to the Design District. After seeing the flooding in his neighborhood from Ian, he dreaded the car ride over to his store the next day.

"When I got to it, I saw it was a complete disaster," he recalled. "None of the employees had damage to their homes. It was bad for the store, but we still considered ourselves fortunate."

Without a place to show off his products, sales fell sharply, but they recovered quickly once he reopened his store, Sheppard said.

Describing himself as an eternal optimist, he's not worried about a repeat of Ian.

"I hope that's the worst Naples will ever see," Sheppard said. "I got the feeling it was ... so I'm not going to worry about that going forward."

The Collective and the Design District are where he wants to be as the area continues to grow and change, with the support of the city.

"We think the best is in front of us," he said.