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Neighborhood Is Taking On A New Look; Some Lament Rent Increases; [FINAL Edition]

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Full Text (796 words)

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The old bank has been vacant for years now, the tall windows caked with dust. In the days when parts of Alexandria were still blue-collar, Del Ray's working class cashed checks here. Later, community residents got their hair cut next door at Mackeys Barbershop and their home appliances fixed at James Cotton's television repair store.

Now the long-gone Potomac Trust Bank and its companion building on Mount Vernon Avenue will be home to a fresh set of tenants: a new restaurant on the ground floor, where, by early next year, patrons will hear live music and dine on fine Italian dishes, and 17 studio and one-bedroom apartments renting for as much as \$1,300 a month.

The renovation of the sand-colored community landmark is a sign of shifting life in Alexandria's Del Ray neighborhood, which for decades was home to thousands of Potomac Yards rail workers. It was even redlined and mostly forgotten by real estate agents. Later, it became an ethnically diverse area of small family businesses, modestly-priced homes and cheap apartments.

Today, a new life is dawning. Once boarded-up bungalows on tree-lined streets go for hundreds of thousands of dollars, snapped up by young professionals looking for charming single-family homes. Apartment rents, once bottom-rung, have doubled in some buildings. A local architect plans a complex with storefront offices on the ground floor and loft apartments above, allowing people to live and work at the same place.

"It's been a gradual change here in Del Ray over the years, but it's been significant," said Michael Babin, an owner of Evening Star Cafe on Mount Vernon Avenue, the community's main street, who is opening the restaurant in the old bank. Like a few neighborhood business owners, he moved to the area several years ago and decided to invest in the community's potential. "People are moving because they see that something special is happening here."

Mark Joseph and his wife, Terri, lawyers in Washington, decided on Del Ray several months ago. They were looking for a homegrown neighborhood that didn't have cul-de-sac developments and large strip malls. In a few weeks, they will move into their new \$320,000 house off Oxford Street.

The neighborhood, where Audi dealerships sit next to boutiques but virtually no national chain stores line the streets, "seemed like the right fit," said Terri Joseph, 34. "It has the residential feel, but you can walk to just about all you need. You don't feel as if you're in the suburbs, but you don't feel as if you're in the city, either."

Yet as one set of residents moves in, others move out. Nowhere is that dynamic played out more dramatically than at the old bank building, where the new tenants also will include Five Oaks Antique Shop and a Pilates fitness studio.

James Cotton, owner of the television repair shop where Babin's new restaurant will soon open, said he couldn't -- and wouldn't -- pay the higher rent that owner Scott Mitchell wanted to charge. Instead of trying to find a new space, he decided to retire after 51 years in the sales and repair business.

"All neighborhoods change. I understand that, but they want this to be Georgetown," said Cotton, who had his shop on Mount Vernon for 13 years. "I guess it's good for some, those who have some money. But if you're middle or working class, you can't afford to stay."

All the businesses in Mitchell's pair of buildings have left or are on their way out, even Ann MeMe's, a bakery next to Cotton's shop that helped usher in the transformation by catering to newcomers with fresh breads and sandwiches. After a 60 percent rent increase, the bakery is closing and will not open elsewhere, owner Dan Maljanian said.

The change hasn't eluded the notice of city officials, some of whom have lived in the neighborhood for decades. Council member Joyce Woodson (D), once a real estate broker in the community, said that Del Ray was once an ethnically, racially, socially and economically diverse neighborhood, a feature rare in many parts of Alexandria. She wonders if it can keep its polyglot complexion with the soaring home prices and high commercial rents.

"Del Ray used to be a place where a family could start off in an apartment and move to their first single-family home" without too much trouble, Woodson said. "I don't have any problem with neighborhoods changing, but [affordability] is becoming harder to achieve."

Yet even as the neighborhood shows signs of becoming a haven for young professionals, mirroring many communities across the region, some in the neighborhood question how long it can sustain the growth.

"It's not a gold mine yet," said Maljanian. "In many ways, the neighborhood has arrived, but it still has a ways to go."

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