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8 Mile Opportunity

By: Rodd Monts



September 4, 2007

Eight Mile Road is both famous and infamous. Long the symbol of divisiveness, the busy thoroughfare has been seen as haven for crime and a resting place for derelict buildings.

The region's economic malaise hasn't helped a bit, with small businesses struggling and cities grappling with ways to continue providing adequate levels of services in the face of shrinking revenues. But Eight Mile also represents 27 miles of prime real estate, and lately the roadway has been attracting more attention for its opportunities than its liabilities to the cities that it borders.

Thanks to rapper Marshall Mathers, better known as [Eminem](#), who lifted up the entire

corridor in the 2002 film [8 Mile](#), the strip is now world famous. In fact, two years ago, Mathers blessed an eBay auction of 30 bricks from a demolished armory on Eight Mile and raised about \$10,000 for his foundation and the [Eight Mile Boulevard Association](#), which organized the event. Bids came in from as far away as Australia.

Yes, the road is that well known, and that's why the EMBA -- a membership consortium representing partners from the 16 cities with roots along its border -- is drawing some interesting looks for recent successes and a collection of plans in the pipeline.

"What we do on Eight Mile stands to change the region," says Tami Salisbury, EMBA executive director. "I think that if we can physically change Eight Mile Road's image, the mental landscape will change with it."



Upgrades and improvements

The association is involved in a number of improvement projects designed to upgrade the stodgy roadway's appearance, with 27 recently planted median gardens, 11 city identification signs and an ambitious façade enhancement project that provides matching funds of up to \$10,000 to help the 1,600 or so businesses in the corridor dress up their facilities.



The façade improvement pilot, which targets a section of Eight Mile that stretches from Interstate 94 to Ryan Road, is funded with \$50,000 from the [Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan](#) and \$35,000 from the [City of Detroit](#). According to Salisbury, the program attracted 12 applicants in its first year.

To further aid the renovation of Eight Mile, the EMBA is looking to fund what it calls the Corridor Keeper program, which will

supply a staffer to help businesses get up to code and address issues with facilities complying with municipal regulations. The association is looking for about \$200,000 to fund the position over three years.

"Quite frankly, if we want to attract Class A tenants we want to make sure that everyone does what they're supposed to do," Salisbury says. The goal is not to heap fines on small businesses, but to connect them with resources to improve parking, remove garbage, cut grass and shovel snow. In the process, the association hopes to create a more attractive destination for companies looking for a new home and consumers looking for entertainment options.

"That's something that has never been done. Detroit would certainly benefit," says Greg Moots, city planner for the City of Detroit. "Basic things like that will certainly improve the whole 27-mile stretch of Eight Mile. It'll certainly help sell the area to potential developers."

New projects

The moves are welcome news to couples like Steve and Trena Burgan. Steve Burgan is an IT



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analyst with [DaimlerChrysler](#) and grew up in the shadows of Eight Mile in Detroit. He and Trena, moved seven years ago to Auburn Hills. The couple has two children.

"We moved here because of our jobs, and both of us live in close proximity to work. But I'd be interested in moving into a new development near Eight Mile in the city if our employment situation were to change," Burgan says. "I think it's a great thing, especially the new projects on the south side of Eight Mile."

The Burgans are the type of young professional couple that Detroit is trying to recruit. That effort will get a huge boost if plans for a 330,000-square-foot mall materialize. [The Shops at Gateway Park](#) is a reported \$70-million project slated to go up at Eight Mile and Woodward Avenue, on a 34-acre site at the Michigan State Fairgrounds. The development would front Eight Mile, and make a huge statement about the city's intent to provide retail options, something that has long been an issue for residents, many of whom have long griped about having to drive to the suburbs to shop.

Retailer [JC Penny](#) is rumored to be the anchor for the development, which could also include four national chain restaurants. Construction is estimated to wrap up in late 2008, although skeptics have been waiting for the project since it was announced three years ago. However, the state Senate in June approved tax and other incentives that should move the development forward.



In addition to answering Detroiters' cries for more retail, the mall should also spur further development in the corridor, which will provide a substantial boost to the EMBA's work. The association has seen its ups and downs during its 14-year history, and struggled as recently as five years ago for relevance.

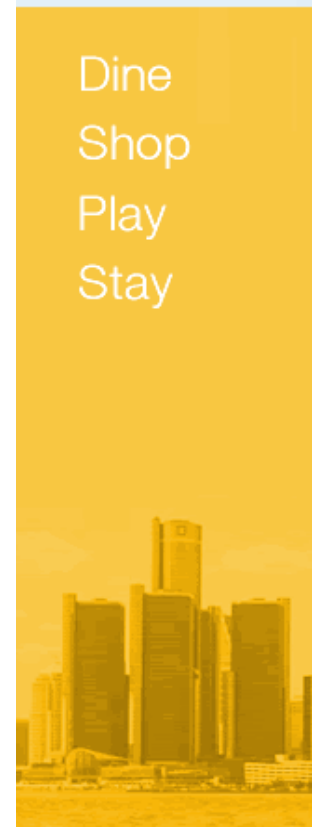
Salisbury says that there was talk about shutting down the organization prior to her coming aboard four and a half years ago. Support for the association was drying up, while negative sentiment was growing. "I love the naysayers," says Salisbury. "A lot of people said the mall will never happen, but it drives me. We do have the ability to change things. We need all hands on deck."

Regional cooperation

Apparently, help is on the way. The wave of regionalism sweeping Southeast Michigan in the form of [One D: Transforming Regional Detroit](#) – a group of six leading civic organizations – along with the success of the Super Bowl and other efforts, has opened the lines of communication between municipal leaders.

The EMBA is not the only association dedicated to improving a designated corridor, nor is it the only group working to revitalize Eight Mile. There are also groups dedicated to Woodward, Van Dyke and other roadways. Likewise, the [Local Initiatives Support Corporation](#) is heading a project focused to pumping new life into the Eight Mile and Van Dyke area.

But the EMBA considers itself at the forefront of regional collaboratives. "We're ahead of the game," says Gary J. Burtka, executive assistant to [Wayne County](#) Executive Robert Ficano, and chair of the EMBA board. Burtka says during a time of belt-tightening by most cities in the region, cooperation across



geographic borders makes sense. Municipalities are reluctant to raise taxes in an effort to drive economic development, so looking for cost efficiencies by combining resources just makes sense.

"Everybody has a piece of the puzzle now," Burtka says. "Once you put it all together, you have a piece of artwork. But it took all of those pieces to create it."

Moots, who works on the organization's planning committee, is also hopeful about recent announcements. He expects additional news to come as a result of the momentum that has been created and expects the EMBA to expand its role in advocacy and as a liaison between the public and private sectors.

Since late Detroit Mayor [Coleman Young](#), upon taking office in the 1970s, issued the controversial warning "to all those pushers, to all rip-off artists, to all muggers: It's time to leave Detroit; hit Eight Mile Road," and ignited a firestorm that smolders to this day, regional leaders have been working off-and-on to heal the resulting fracture. The EMBA is helping to usher in a real recovery.

Rodd Monts is a regular contributor to Model D.

Photos:

Sunflower in front of Blumz in Ferndale

8 Mile Road sign

Warren - Detroit Sign in the 8 Mile median

Flowers Planted by the Packard Street Block Club in Detroit

Woodward overpass renovations

New Sidewalks for the Woodward - 8 Mile intersection near the site of The Shops of Gateway Park

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