

mike leonard



New Bloomingfoods Is Changing Elm Heights

It might be a small exaggeration to say that the opening of Bloomingfoods Elm Heights late last summer changed the neighborhood overnight.

There is a noticeable increase in pedestrian activity, not just around the sturdy new brick building built to aesthetically fit into the century-old, core Bloomington neighborhood, but radiating out in all directions. You see more people, not just walking dogs or schlepping to and from the Indiana University campus, but people toting fabric grocery bags, stopping to chat with neighbors, or pausing to point out an architectural feature on a house that had previously gone unnoticed.

The neighborhood just feels more like an urban neighborhood, in a good way, and the district's city council member Steve Volan says, "I couldn't be happier about it."

Those of us who can walk a few blocks to a quality grocery and deli are pretty giddy, too.

"When Faris Market (in the heart of downtown) closed in 2006, I thought I'd never see its like in town again," Volan says. "We need grocery stores like the new Elm Heights store in every core neighborhood. More markets, not supermarkets.... The pedestrian nature of the corner makes the neighborhood inherently more social—truly the way it used to be before we gave our whole town over to car drivers."

It's worth recalling that, long after most neighborhood stores had gone the way of the dodo, Elm Heights enjoyed a grocery in the same spot as the new Bloomingfoods. And contrary to what a lot of people have been saying recently—that the old K&S Country Market "just couldn't make it"—that's not true. Owners Kelly and Scott Misheikis were doing fine until the land under them was purchased by a New York-based investment company with designs on turning the block on East 2nd Street into a major development.

The neighborhood and city challenged the size and scale of the proposed development, the investors never came up with a workable plan, and K&S was forced to close because the would-be developers would not agree to any lease for the market. It became too risky for the Misheikis family to continue to invest in inventory when they could have been booted out with little-to-no notice.

Scott Misheikis has had time to get over the considerable frustration he felt when he had to close the K&S Country Market after 16 years of ownership in 2007. "It wasn't my health that I lost. It was just money," he told me. He not only took a hit when he liquidated his inventory—he completely lost his investment in the business because without a location it had no value.

He's doing fine now as general manager of The Office Lounge and Liquor Store and cherishes the memories of having lunch with his father, John, virtually every day, watching over the old neighborhood grocery. But surely it has to grate on him to see that, because of the way things unfolded, Bloomingfoods was able to buy the property, and build a bigger and nicer store.

"To be honest, I'm glad there's something in there now. The neighbors deserve it," he said. "That was always part of the fun. The neighbors were nice, the students who came through were fun. It was a nice chapter in our lives."

For the central Bloomington neighborhood, so rich in local history, a new chapter has begun.

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