

MEXICANTOWN HITS ROADBLOCK

I-75 construction limits access to neighborhood State adds signage to help

BY MARGARITA BAUZA • FREE PRESS BUSINESS WRITER • APRIL 12, 2008

But it doesn't have to hurt this much, said Horacio Vargas, executive director of LaSed, a social services agency in southwest Detroit.

"Traffic through town is gridlock because it's one lane each way," said Vargas, who helps clients with translation and immigration paperwork. "I know the restaurants are really hurting. Their business is down significantly."

For the last six months, southwest Detroit merchants have operated under the chaos stemming from one of the most high-profile projects in the Michigan Department of Transportation's history. The \$170-million, two-year project will rebuild the I-75 and I-96 connection and transform the entrance onto the Ambassador Bridge to Canada.

Business is down drastically at La Gloria Bakery on Bagley Street, said baker Daniel Gonzalez, who is used to serving 60 to 70 customers a day. A typical morning now brings about 10 customers, though weekends are still busy.

"It's right in front of us," Gonzalez said of the construction. "We've lost half of our clientele. We don't have parking out front, and our lot has been destroyed. Everyone on this block is hurting."

The project has dismantled the roads around and leading up to Mexicantown, diverting truck and commuter traffic far away from a rarity in Detroit -- a dense and commercially vibrant neighborhood.

I-75 is closed between Clark Street and Rosa Parks Boulevard -- main routes into Mexicantown -- for the duration of the project, which is scheduled for completion in December 2009.

Southwest Detroit merchants -- between 1,770 and 2,200 of them, depending on who you ask -- say they eventually will benefit from the project, as long as they survive it.

"We want to make sure there will be businesses left after the construction," said Edith Castillo, deputy director of Southwest Detroit Business Association. "This area has been growing for some time. It's dense and walkable."

The construction project has been on the books for 30 years, but it wasn't until cranes began digging, side streets were demolished and streets closed that local merchants started to panic.

Evie's Tamales, also on Bagley, buys sweet bread from La Gloria that it serves to its customers. To bypass construction and the lack of parking, an employee from Evie's walks to La Gloria to pick it up, said manager Irene Garza.

Garza said the restaurant is receiving many calls from customers for directions.

"Some people give up," she said. "What's helping us is that construction workers have to eat, so they come in."

"People that know us are not discouraged by the construction, but it's different if you're coming from out of town."

Tenants of the new, \$17-million Mexicantown International Welcome Center and Mercado, which opened in October, are hurting, too, said Maria Elena Rodriguez, president of the Mexicantown Community Development Corp.

"It's unbelievably bad timing," she said. The center is located right in the thick of construction on Bagley.

The *mercado's* new merchants include coffee, folk art and candle shops and two jewelry stores.

"And we're looking to lease space for restaurants," Rodriguez said. "We have a great location, and space is available. The challenge is that people are frightened when they see all this."

Once construction is finished, the welcome center is expected to draw more than 800,000 people a year. A new pedestrian bridge that is to connect east and west Mexicantown will help businesses, too.

MDOT said it has invested heavily into helping local businesses. It has distributed maps showing how to get to landmarks such as Ste. Anne's church from different parts of town. The agency also has added and enhanced signs, has a Spanish-speaking engineer on site to help address the needs of the community and created a Web site with traffic information and detour routes.

"Everybody's not going to be happy," MDOT spokeswoman Brenda Peek said. "We're giving it a good effort."

Castillo said MDOT could have done more at the start of the project to help traffic navigate southwest Detroit, and more can still be done.

She said her organization is distributing a survey to measure the impact of construction on southwest Detroit merchants. She said she hopes the survey will help net grant money for advertising and marketing for the area.

"We know there's a soft economy," Castillo said. "We want to have some data that helps determine if businesses are hurting due to the closure or recession.

"This is not a neighborhood issue," she added. "It's a commerce issue. What happens here affects what happens in other parts of Detroit and in Michigan."

Merchants say they just want customers to keep visiting despite the construction.

"We're open for business," said Rodriguez. "It's easier to get here than you can imagine."

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