

# THE SOURCE

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Elston business owners pictured above (left - right): Paul Fiermonte (Casamonte); Kelly Brown, Bill Rodon Hornof, and Colette Rodon Hornof (2RZ Architecture and Vesta); Safa Moayyed and Luann Mannino (Galleria Concord)

## ELSTON AVENUE ON THE RISE

Will the Elston Corridor experience the same commercial boom that the Clybourn Corridor has over the past few years? A study by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center for Economic Development has shown a 30% growth in the number of businesses along Elston from 2000 to 2004 (November 2005), and current property investors and business owners agree that Elston is on the rise.

With the establishment of a PMD (Planned Manufacturing District) in 1990, growth has been slow but steady along Elston Avenue. According to section 17-6-0401-A of the Chicago Zoning Ordinance, the purpose of a PMD is (among other things) to "encourage industrial investment, modernization, and expansion by providing for stable and predictable industrial environments." In layman's terms, a PMD is a zoning designation that restricts retail development in order to preserve and maintain industry and manufacturing within the city. This means that an average storefront retail store would not work on the street but various service and wholesale businesses would be a perfect fit with the surrounding industry and manufacturing enterprises.

Is the PMD helping or hurting Elston's growth? Elston business owners seem divided on the issue. Since only certain types of businesses can operate in a PMD, there are a few hoops businesses have to jump through in order to be "approved". "There's enough vacant property, and if there weren't so many barriers, I think people would lease them," says Paul Fiermonte of Casamonte, located at Concord and Elston. But Colette Rodon Hornof of 2RZ Architecture and Vesta (both also located at Concord and Elston) thinks that the PMD status has had little effect on business growth in the area.

Business owners do agree, however, that Elston's location is key in contributing to growth. "There's excellent access because of the Kennedy Expressway and plenty of public parking, and there are a lot of great buildings around here," Fiermonte says.

When you combine the restrictions of a PMD and intriguing architectural gems that need to be fixed up, the logical outcome is an influx of design-oriented businesses. "People in the design industry tend to gravitate toward things that still need to be developed. They know that even though it looks terrible now, it will be amazing," says Rodon Hornof, "You have to have the vision to make it your own."

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## ELSTON AVENUE ON THE RISE (CONTINUED)

As a result, Rodon Hornof and her husband, Bill Rodon Hornof, invested in the area by buying the building they now refer to as the Elston Design Center. They moved their own business, 2RZ Architecture (and later Vesta) into the building, but initially turned down a few other potential tenants. "We had a specific direction [for the building] in mind," Rodon Hornof recalls, "And developing this building the way we did has made people look at the neighborhood differently." The Elston Design Center consists of three tenants: 2RZ Architecture, Vesta (kitchen design showroom), and Casamonte (high-end plumbing fixtures and fireplaces). And nearby, residential design enthusiasts can also find Galleria Concord (unique hardwood furniture and furnishings) among other stores. "Within a half block radius, you can do your whole house," Safa Moayyed and Luann Mannino, owners of Galleria Concord explain. "And [the businesses] really support each other."

Support comes predominantly by way of mutual referrals which makes the tight-knit block an excellent destination point for those seeking to redesign their homes. "It's different from the Merchandise Mart where there are hundreds of people just looking," Rodon Hornof says, "We're far enough off of the beaten path that people are coming in for a reason, and we'd rather have fewer but more serious people coming in."

But word of mouth is spreading, and traffic—pedestrian and otherwise—along the Elston Corridor is gradually increasing. The nearby firehouse was recently redeveloped in anticipation of an influx of activity in the area. Land values are increasing and the largest vacancy on the strip has just been filled. Elston Industrial Lofts, LLC

recently purchased the former Aetna Plywood Building at 1761 North Elston and will be redeveloping the 85,000 square foot space to include industrial and commercial condominiums. The building that formerly housed Chicago Yacht Supply has also been sold and is being redeveloped by a high-end audio company expected to open in July or August.

According to Rodon Hornof and Fiermonte, more and more people are stopping to look at the new developments. "Three to four people a week stop in and ask me if I like it here," Fiermonte says. And Rodon Hornof adds, "Six months ago there were only a few cars parked on the street, now look at it. Activity has definitely increased."

All of this means good news to current and potential business owners along the Elston Corridor. The area is primed for development, so what's next? "We'd love to see a tile store, a stone warehouse, a graphic design firm..." Rodon Hornof responds excitedly.

"Everybody here is new, and they have a lot of fresh ideas. The beauty is here," Mannino says looking around her showroom, "I love it." **LP**

*To further explore the Elston Design Center and other businesses along the Elston Corridor, don't miss the Chamber's August 9 Business After Hours at Vesta, 1357 W. Concord.*

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