

The Briergate Business District: Open for **MORE** Business

by Mira Temkin

Photo: Evan Kane Photography

For some Highland Parkers, the Briergate Business District, located on the northwest side of town just west of Highway 41, is the area where their family businesses have operated for years—several for three or four generations. For others, this district houses some of their favorite businesses, some they could consider hidden gems. But for most of us, it's simply the area off Highway 41 that we wiz by while traveling north or south, not really knowing exactly what's back there. But regardless of why anyone is traveling in or around Briergate, everyone is bound to notice the greater visibility in the area, as well as the increase in directional signage.

BBAD Helps Pave the Way

Over the years, Briergate had become overrun with the invasive plant called buckthorn, as well as with other brush and debris. In response, the Briergate Business Association District (BBAD) was created, spearheading a series of

improvements, with more planned in the coming months.

Working with the City of Highland Park, the city's Business and Economic Development Commission (BEDC), and the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT), BBAD's leaders helped develop a plan to make the area more accessible with greater visibility. "This project demonstrates the benefits of multiple governments working together to achieve a common goal," said Mayor Nancy Rotering. "It's a win-win situation for Highland Park."

Two business owners who have been highly instrumental in Briergate's revitalization are David Brunjes and Mark Williams. Brunjes, who owns Craftwood Lumber and Hardware, is President of BBAD. Williams, who is the group's secretary, is owner of Williams Ski and Patio, which has been in its present location since 1969. "My father, Richard, liked it because it was visible from the highway," he said.

Briergate's revitalization "project started around two years ago," said Brunjes. "A group of us wanted to clear out the buckthorn, undergrowth, and garbage from east of Old Skokie Road to Route 41. The brush was so thick that it hid a lot of businesses. Volunteers worked to pick up trash that included old cell phones, cans, and more."

Last spring, crews began clearing away trees, shrubs, and refuse. Brunjes said, "Now that the area has been cleared, most of the tenants are pleased with the results. Once people got over the initial shock, they liked the exposure."

Over the next few years, a diverse mix of native grasses, sedges, and wildflowers will be planted, closely monitored to assure the native plants take root. More signage is also coming, and Williams said increased lighting, road upgrades, and additional parking are also planned.

Views on the New Look

Bill Clark, owner of Bishop Heating, participated in the initial clean-up. In business since 1943, Bishop Heating has been located in several Briergate locations. Clark said his father Tom purchased the present location in 1988. "The increase in visibility has definitely prompted an increase in traffic since the improvements," he said.

Bluegrass owner Jim Lederer likes the location of his restaurant, which is kitty corner from the Highland Park Police Station. "When we were looking at sites in 2004, we never wanted to be in the mainstream," Lederer said. "We wanted to be a little off the beaten path, and then this site became available. It was close to our home and had good parking." Lederer feels that Jewel and Toys R Us have always been a draw for Briergate, but the rebirth of the area has definitely increased his traffic. "The



David Brunjes of Craftwood Lumber and Hardware and Mark Williams of Williams Ski and Patio

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renovation also has led us to embark on our own improvements. By beautifying the entire area, it makes our customers feel better about coming here," he said.



Owner Ray Schuler of Rover's Place with some of his cuddly clients.

Ray and Lindsay Schuler bought Rover's Place, a dog daycare and boarding facility, from the previous owners in 2006. Ray said the removal of the trees has opened up the whole area. "I like it because you can now see our sign from the highway, giving us greater visibility. It's made our facility much brighter."

Loree Wasserman who opened Loree's Closet, a luxury consignment business, two years ago chose her Briergate location because it offered warehouse as well as office space. In addition, it was convenient for her North Shore customers. "The increase in traffic since they've cleared the area will help all of the businesses back here," she said.

Wine Discount Center owner Peter Schwarzbach has been in Briergate for



The Wine Discount Center...ready for business!

almost 20 years. "This was a way to be a part of the Highland Park business community that was consistent with my business model," he said. He was surprised by the impact of the clean up. "One new customer who lived right across the street from WDC said she had no idea we were here until they cleared away the trees," he said.

Still there are others not as happy with the project. Wedding planner Linda Alpert of Affairs with Linda has been in Briergate for more than 15 years. She opened her business in the area because of its easy access to the highway for her clients. "I also loved the privacy," she said. "Now it's all out in the open." While she sees the new signage and some of the other improvements as positive, she's anxious to see what else is planned.

Positive Signs Also Sprouting Up

Dan Buss of D&R Autoworks is moving his auto repair business into a new 14,000 foot facility at the corner of Old Skokie and Old Deerfield Roads. Buss said the new bigger facility, scheduled to open this fall, will offer expanded services.

"With the number of retail businesses that have opened back there, plus the re-development of (the former) Opportunity, Inc., and of Solo Cup, Briergate has a bright future, and I'm happy to be part of it," Buss added.

Carolyn Hersch, Economic Development Coordinator for the City of Highland Park, added that the property owners of the former Opportunity, Inc., site "have come to the city with a plan to convert it into a self-storage facility for now, and with hopes for re-development for retail in the future."

So What Else Is Back There?

In total, there are more than 119 offices, light industrial, and retail establishments located in Briergate. Did you know you can take piano lessons, buy a baby gift, take kickboxing, send cookies, eat, drink, and be merry...then lose weight and work out? You can also have your car repaired, get business cards printed, and have artwork framed. Now that the buckthorn is gone and the new signs are up, take a drive and check out all that Briergate has to offer. You may discover a whole new part of Highland Park to love.

Community members interested in keeping up with the latest developments of the area's revitalization are invited to visit the Briergate Business Association District's Facebook page.

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