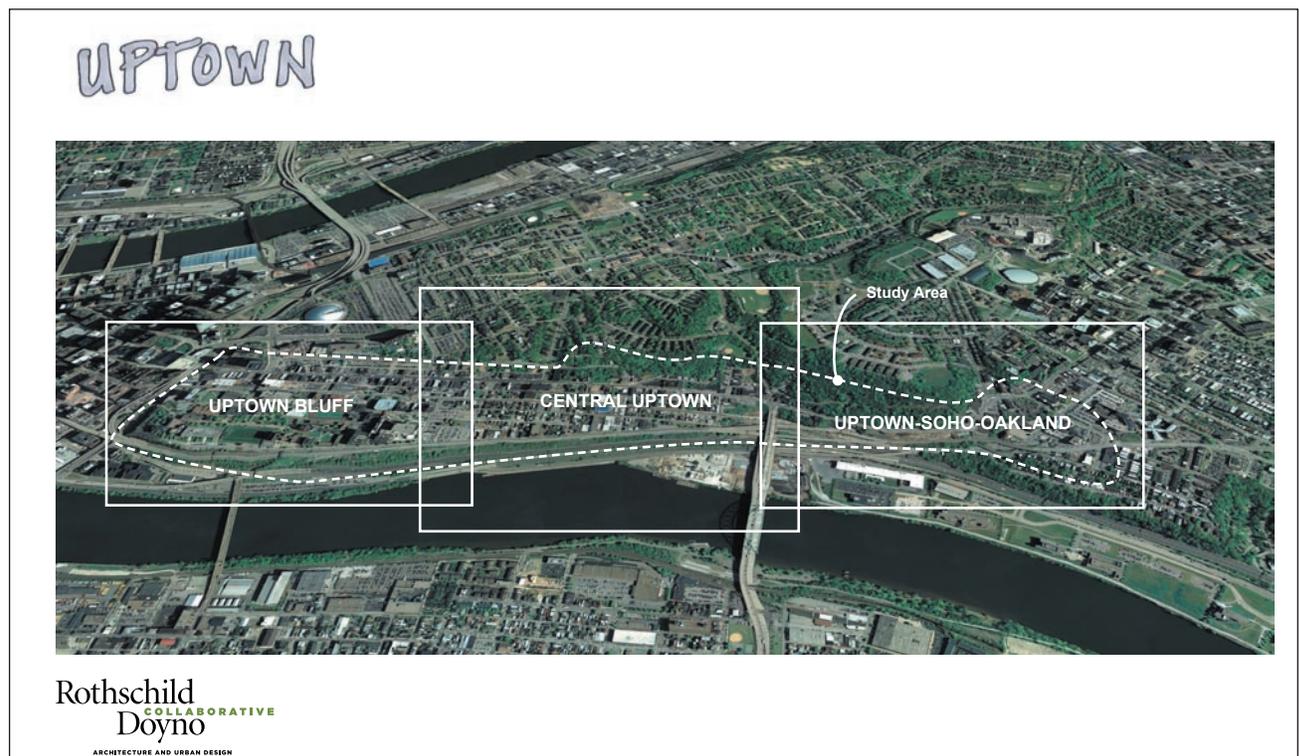


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Uptown's Future Looking Brighter as Developers Take Notice

By Ben Semmes



Uptown, a long ignored corridor leading from Oakland to Downtown, may finally get some attention.

With work on the new Pittsburgh Penguins arena underway, area developers are eyeing the neighborhood for future opportunities.

Sal Williams Real Estate Investments, one of Uptown's largest landowners, has been amassing property in Uptown for decades and has pledged to convert a sea of surface parking lots into new development.

Thus far, the company has

attracted the interest of at least one developer with its long-term plans to convert about 16 surface parking lots along Fifth Avenue into housing, retail and office space.

Linda Metropulos, the developer behind the Blackbird Lofts and Ice House Artist Studios in Lawrenceville, has been working with Sal Williams Real Estate for several months to identify opportunities in the neighborhood. She declined to identify potential projects, but said Uptown has become a focus for her firm.

"You have a neighborhood that has seen a lot of disinvestment,"

she said. "I saw the opportunity and the need. It just struck me that this neighborhood has this rich history and this great location."

Sal Williams Real Estate, which owns about 140 parcels in the Uptown neighborhood, received city approval last month to expand the company's parking capacity along Fifth Avenue with a limit of six years — the time the company says it will need to interest developers in the neighborhood.

"We want to take away the surface parking lots as soon as possible," said Tony Williams, who manages Uptown property for the

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company.

So far, the firm has had one major success with its strategy of amassing property and then selling to developers.

At the end of 2004, Duquesne University paid \$8 million for several parcels at Forbes Avenue and Chatham Square to construct its 126,000-square-foot, \$30 million Power Center, featuring a two-level Barnes & Noble Inc. bookstore connected to the campus by way of a 138-foot skywalk.

Sal Williams Real Estate, which owned about 40 percent of the properties used in the Duquesne development, made \$3.2 million in the deal.

Metropulos, along with Strip District-based Rothschild Doyno Collaborative architects, has

secured \$40,000 from Sal Williams Real Estate, the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Partnership for Neighborhood Development to fund a three-month planning process with community groups Uptown Partners of Pittsburgh, the Hill House Economic Development Corp. and Oakland Planning & Development Corp. Metropulos said the process will help generate a vision for development in the neighborhood.

Some local developers say the timing could be right to pursue opportunities in Uptown. "I think property down there is much more in play than in recent history," said Bill Gatti, president of Oakland-based TREK Development.

Gatti said construction of the new hockey arena and development fueled by Duquesne University and Mercy Hospital — at the base of Uptown closest to the central business district — have pushed the company to consider the area, although he declined to identify specific projects, and TREK has not yet purchased property in the neighborhood.

"I think the time is obviously right with the new arena development," said Karl Schlachter, senior vice president and head of the Pittsburgh office of McCormack Baron Salazar Inc., which has developed several residential projects in the Hill District. The company did not identify any immediate plans for the Uptown area.