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Something new for ISU

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Voices of the past, present & future explain the change

McDonald’s, Taco Bell, Ihop, Hardee’s, Burger King... These names represent some of the ghosts of restaurants past in Campustown. From clothing stores and movie theaters to unique restaurants, bars and tattoo parlors, the change has been obvious to those in the community. Voices of the past, present and future of Campustown hold the key to explaining the change.

Larry Curtis started school at Iowa State in 1963, when Iowa State’s student population boasted approximately 11,000 students. Lincoln Way was a two lane street funneling traffic before the arrival of Highway 30, and Campustown had three men’s clothing stores and multiple movie theaters.

Some of the change in the diversity of businesses in Campustown came with the allowance of beer permits, around the time Curtis was wrapping up his time at Iowa State. “Campustown was dry, essentially, until that time period,” Curtis said of the late 1960s in Ames.

More change occurred after the opening of North Grand Mall in the early 1970s. The mall was a nearby and affordable space for students to shop for clothing, and the dynamic of stores in Campustown kept changing.

It was around this time, in August of 1976, that Pizza Pit made its way to Ames from Madison, Wis. Tom Northrup opened their first branch and purchased it in 1980.

In 1984, Northrup bought what was once a bar known as the Library Lounge and renamed it Welch Ave Station, which it remains to this day. The building used to have books on the front of the store; that was, Northrup speculated, students could tell their worried parents they were headed to “the Library” without lying.

Northrup has been in Ames ever since, witnessing many businesses come and go from Campustown. “Campustown has many small businesses that open here,” Northrup said. “Campustown is kind of like the incubator of businesses.”

He gave some credit to the low rent in Campustown but said he’s seen the growth power Campustown can have on small businesses. They’ll start small, grow here in Ames and then expand, move out and get bigger.

This is what made Campustown so diverse and unique - and still does today. In fact, it has proven to be the small, single location restaurants that have withstood the test of time.

Matthew Goodman, a business owner and Ames city council member began his adventure with Campustown when he started college in Matthew Goodman, a business owner and Ames city council member began his adventure with Campustown when he started college in 1991 and got a job with the gyro stand. “I still own that business, the gyro stand, but now we do a lot of other things,” Goodman explained.

In fact, Goodman owns many restaurants in Ames to this day, including Smiles and Gyros, Superdog, Lorry’s Coffee, The Fighting Burrito and Battle’s Barbeque. His businesses held through time, so what was the change that caused the chain restaurants to leave Campustown?

While in school, Goodman was a member of the Memorial Union Board of Directors. He saw the change in dining at the Memorial Union firsthand - from the old “80s style cafeteria” to the current mall-style food court. This led to a decrease in Campustown diners.

Regardless, Goodman said it’s the atmosphere and clientele in Campustown that have kept his businesses there. “It’s just very diverse, eclectic; I like that,” Goodman said. “I guess I just love the energy of the student population more than anything else. That’s the kind of market I want to serve. That market isn’t perfect, like sometimes that market breaks things and – you know – they don’t do everything beautifully, but most of them really seem to be enjoying themselves.”

But in Goodman’s experience, there’s been a huge residential change as well as commercial. This is because of the changing needs of the university, as well as the neighborhood’s change in appearance. Where apartment complexes like Legacy Towers and Cyclone Plaza stand tall, there were large, outdated and run-down residences. “The properties that used to be on this Cyclone Plaza were kind of weird, you know a little bit strange and not super enduring construction,” Goodman said. “So I’d say more than anything you’ve seen a lot of older, dilapidated residential wood construction housing disappear and be replaced by much higher density housing.”
Ames' new theatre hosts 850 officers of the Iowa State College Air Force ROTC for the day, 1956
Aerial view of Hayward and Lincoln Way

1941 Champlin Block - today’s Kingland Systems
Campustown’s past is rich with history thanks to its connection with both Iowa State and the Ames community, but it’s the future of Campustown that has Ames buzzing. With revitalization plans underway through Kingland Systems, some people believe Campustown is about to get another facelift.

“I think sometimes people feel Campustown isn’t for them because some of the buildings aren’t really dealt with appropriately, they’re ugly or they’re not clean,” Goodman said. “I think making it look cleaner and nicer will broaden the market, which is probably in our best interest.”

The plans, which will begin at Pita Pit and continue down Welch Ave to Lincoln Way and the Cranford Apartments, would change the look of the corner dramatically, giving it updated buildings and bringing in new business.

“We are very excited to expand our presence in Campustown... we are thrilled that the project can be such a positive catalyst for breathe new life into the Campustown area and look forward to seeing additional projects that may come from others in future years,” said Todd Rognes, President of Kingland Systems.

With plans to open more office and retail space, the construction will draw more people to the Campustown area. It also might solve a huge problem students face in Campustown: lack of parking. “What they’re proposing is a significant increase in available parking lots,” Curtis said. “That’s probably, in my mind, the biggest plus.”

Before the construction of the Ames Intermodal Facility, Campustown had almost nothing in the way of parking.
The parking addition is a main reason Northrup supports the Kingland renovations.

But Campustown’s new look comes with a cost: a loss of history and a prominent social corner. Businesses and office space on the corner of Lincoln Way and Welch Ave just won’t have the same vibe. Goodman said he’s worried about the effect of the change on the atmosphere of Campustown.

“You know it’s not like having a pizza and beer place, you know to go see shows or… So I think it is going to hinder that corner’s social draw and that whole area’s social draw,” Goodman said.

“The first brick-laid building in Campustown is that corner building; and to knock it down I think is short-sighted. It doesn’t mean that there wouldn’t be a great deal of benefits as a result of it, I just don’t think it’s in the best interest of Campustown overall, the way the project is currently designed,” Goodman said.

“Some people see the world for the new shiny things it can be, some people see the world for the amazing dusty things it has been, and I think I’m probably leaning towards the previous piece a little bit, because I just think it creates longer-term relationships than the new shiny things.”