





NOSTALGIC APPEAL

With its many small and family-owned businesses, mid-century architecture, and welcoming vibe, the Southland neighborhood is a Lexington original.

By Rena Baer / Photos By David Coyle

nostalgic appeal

Lexington's Southland is an eclectic neighborhood built and grounded in the 1950s that — despite the conservatism of that era — has remained mostly trendy and hip through the years. Its nostalgic appeal has attracted not only new businesses and spurred a 50 percent rise in commercial property values in the past decade, but also has helped generate grants and funding to move the area into the future with progressive ideas, “pop-up” public spaces, and greater accessibility to bikers and walkers.

Southland resident Susan Brown, who has lived in the area for 18 years and raised three children there, said she has noticed the change. “It’s growing more vibrant,” she said. “Things have always come and gone here, but now there’s more of them coming than going.”

The area’s main commercial thoroughfare, the mile-long Southland Drive, is probably one of the most well-known, well-traveled, and well-loved streets in Lexington. It’s an interesting dynamic, given its relatively abbreviated length and rather average looks at first glance. The corridor primarily comprises a series of independently owned suburban strip malls — and not even the latter-day strip malls of brown brick, reflective glass, and tight parking.

Constructed mainly in the 1950s, along with the homes in the neighborhood, these are the granddaddies of the modern strip mall. Many are distinguished by shops with plate-glass windows, spacious parking lots, and plenty of access and egress. Their low-slung, well-worn ranch-like appearance seems at odds with today’s high ceilings and abundant white space.

These throwback structures aren’t something that would appear in *Architectural Digest*. Yet, there is an appeal to their retro looks that attracts businesses and customers. Anyone driving by can’t help but marvel at the odd collection of stores: A tattoo parlor, a leather shop, dual comic book stores, two vacuum



A 1961 aerial view of the Southland area shows the thoughtful mix of residential and commercial development that remains intact today, as evidenced by a 2017 aerial view of Southland Drive from Vista Street.

shops, and a variety of music stores are sandwiched among the usual suspects. Two new additions, a Hampton Inn and Health-First (a medical, dental, and pharmaceutical clinic), bookend the busy stretch.

Lexington resident Christina Hager opened her furniture resale store, The Great Room, two years ago on Southland Drive and said both the location and the neighborhood are the right fit.

“They are revamping the neighborhood and bringing quality back to life, which is similar to what I do here with our furniture,” she said. “Plus, you can’t beat the location. Everyone knows where Southland Drive is. It’s got a ton of visibility.”

It’s an interesting mix of primarily locally owned businesses and some national chains or a combination thereof. Southland was once home to the nation’s very first Long John Silver’s, known originally as the Cape Codder. Though the signature Cape Cod roof remains (now painted black instead of aquamarine), the building currently houses a beauty salon.



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Lewis Epley, frontline manager at Good Foods Co-Op, says the store attracts a wide range of customers: "You can go out in the parking lot and see all kinds of political bumper stickers."

"There are so many locally owned businesses, probably one of the highest percentages in Lexington," said Hilary Baumann, president of the Southland Association, a public group comprising merchants and residents dedicated to growing the area's viability.

Several businesses have become synonymous with Southland, including Donut Days, Collins Southland Bowling Center, Winchell's restaurant, and German restaurant Marikka's, which was recently razed and is being rebuilt with more space, including room for indoor and outdoor volleyball courts.

Locally owned Old Kentucky Chocolates has been in the area for more than 50 years. Owner Don Hurt, who is now in semi-retirement at the age of 80, remembers the area as having the first shopping center in Lexington, complete with a Kroger,

Woolworth's (lunch counter included), Begley Drugs, a bank, and a hardware store.

"It was a well-rounded little shopping area," said Hurt. "And that hardware store? If they didn't have it, you didn't need it."

With all the recent interest in the area, Old Kentucky Chocolates is doing even more of a booming business, he said, bringing in more than 10,000 customers around Valentine's Day.

"Southland has really been rejuvenated," he said. "It looks nice and clean, and I look for parking ... and there's always plenty. I am an old-timer. I want to pull up and shop. I don't want to have to walk 40 miles."

Hurt credited Good Foods Co-Op, which moved to the area in 1986, with becoming a neighborhood anchor and helping the area regain an upward trajectory, particularly in the past decade,



Hilary Baumann, president of the Southland Association, notes the area's high percentage of locally owned businesses.



Since its arrival in 1986, Good Foods Co-Op has served as a commercial anchor of Southland Drive.

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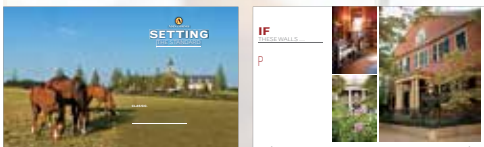


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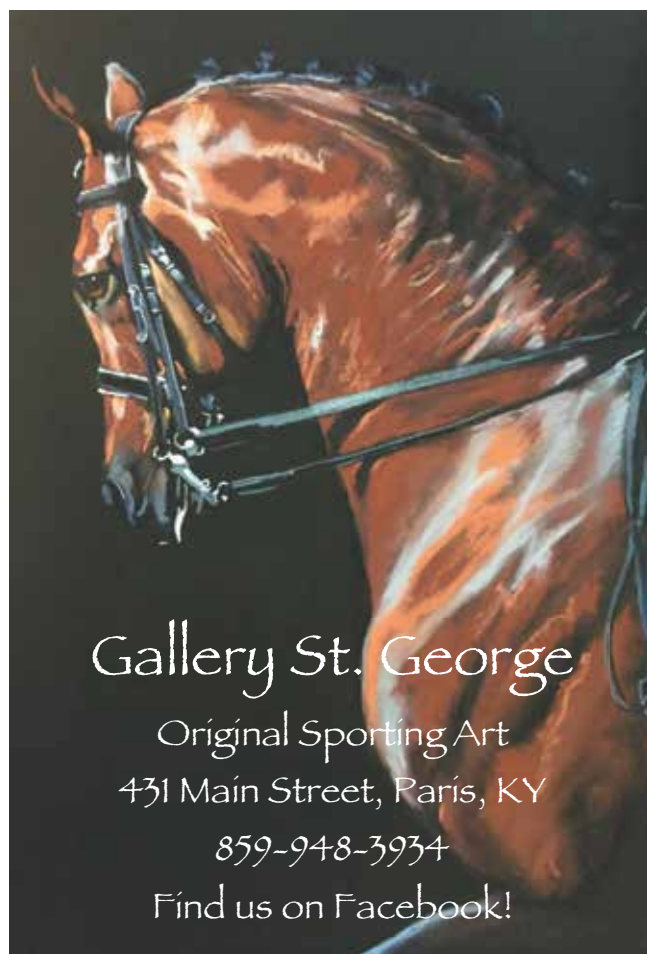
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Old Kentucky Chocolates owner Don Hurt says the area's rejuvenation and cleanliness, as well as ample parking for shoppers, have boosted business.

following some years of suburban blight.

As a non-traditional grocery store that sells organic produce and local goods and supports an extensive wellness/dietary supplement department, Good Foods complements the Southland neighborhood, said Lewis Epley, the store's frontline manager. Its less conventional offerings, in addition to its café, are well supported by locals, many of whom are part of either a college or professional crowd, he said.

"It's an area that has always seemed like it is progressive in thought — which is good for us," said Epley, "not necessary liberal, but a wide mix of people who come here regardless of their political leanings. You can go out in the parking lot and see all kinds of political bumper stickers."

The same holds true of the Lexington Farmers Market in Southland, held every Sunday, April through October. Since the Southland Association helped bring it to the area in 2005, the Farmers Market has drawn an increasing number of visitors. "It's been a big help to the area," said Baumann. "It brings people here who don't want to go to the Farmers Market downtown on Saturday and have to find parking. Accessible parking matters to people. It really does."

Brown said she always leaves the Farmers Market with her arms full and is glad to have her car nearby. But she also appreciates that so many restaurants and shops are within walking distance of her house. It was one of the reasons she was attracted to the area, along with the schools and the fact that Southland is an older neighborhood with larger yards, big trees, and more economical houses.



Realtor and resident Nancy Christiano lauds the area's diversity and trendiness.

One of the first suburban neighborhoods in Lexington — built during a decade known for its smaller homes — houses usually run between 1,000 and 1,800 square feet. They are noted for their quality construction, hardwood floors, and spacious, leafy yards, said Southland resident Nancy Christiano, who is also a realtor. Home styles range from brick ranches and cottages to stone Cape Cods to bungalows. "You won't find two houses that are the same," she said. "Each one has its own character. And these are houses with good bones. Many have been renovated, and some have additions."

Homes average in the \$150,000s, but start lower than \$100,000 and can go up past \$275,000. And while most homes average 60 days on the market in Lexington, houses in

Southland often turn over in just a matter of days, sometimes in a matter of minutes.

"It's a very trendy and diverse area," she said. "And it's a dog-walking community. Everyone knows each other by their pets."

Christiano said the area is very popular among young families because of its public schools, but the appeal doesn't stop there. "College students, young single adults, couples without kids, empty nesters ... it's a wide demographic that's attracted to the area. It's like a little small town in Lexington ... and it's in a great location: close to the University of Kentucky, the hospitals, and downtown. The only thing we are missing is a hardware store."

Southland is also undergoing changes to make it more accessible to walkers and bikers. A recent \$600,000 community improvement project added bike lanes on Southland Drive from Nicholasville Road to Rosemont Garden (funded largely by

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Southland is popular among young families because of its schools, small-town feel, and proximity to bigger-city amenities. Improvements are under way to add more sidewalks. Below, Southland residents enjoy walking their dogs and know each other by their pets.

federal grants with some local money from the city of Lexington and the Southland Association). Sidewalks also were installed under the railroad underpass to improve pedestrian safety. And beginning in May, they will be extended to run the length of Southland Drive, making it walkable from end to end.

A second project, Retrofitting the Retro, will build on those improvements by creating visions for the future, said Brandi Peacher of Lexington's Division of Planning. The division has partnered with the University of Kentucky to gather data and explore and design innovative ways to revitalize shared public spaces in the Southland area. Students have been collecting the history of the neighborhood and soliciting

input from residents and merchants on the best way to develop public pop-up green spaces between and around the many suburban strip malls.

"It has been a great opportunity for students to do a real project and reach out to real neighborhoods and real people," said Peacher, who is working with UK's School of Interiors, Department of Landscape Architecture, and Department of Historic Preservation.

The pop-up public spaces are intended to connect and revitalize the strip malls by changing the parking lots into public spaces that incorporate the arts while still providing adequate room for customer traffic. "A lot of the lessons we learned from revitalizing downtowns, we are using to apply to suburban areas," said Peacher.



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Live music venue and restaurant Willie's Locally Known received a warm welcome when it moved from downtown to larger quarters in Southland.

Through a competition funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation in conjunction with Blue Grass Community Foundation, students' design ideas were sought to create a better connection between physical spaces and among people.

The winner of the competition, UK landscape architecture student Rakeem Bradshaw, designed a pop-up space that will appear in concert with the Farmers Market. "The Music Lounge" will consist of an open-air wooden structure where kids can sit and play with instruments made from simple materials such as PVC pipes. The idea pays homage to Southland's musical underpinnings, said Peachier.

The corridor earned the official mayoral designation of "Music Row" in 2011 for the half dozen or more music shops that have made their home there over the years. It's a good location, close to the School for the Creative and Performing Arts, a Fayette County Public School's special program for music- and arts-oriented students, and Lafayette High School, whose marching band has won 18 state championships. Both turn out hundreds of music-loving students. The area also was home for several years to the Southland Jamboree, a hugely popular bluegrass music summer concert that would draw as many as 500 people on Tuesday nights.

A "Welcome to Southland" sign designed to look like a guitar neck celebrates the neighborhood's musical bent. The creative sign went up last year, thanks to the Southland Association's efforts in conjunction with UK students who helped with the design.

Lexington staple Willie's Locally Known also relocated to Southland last year, bringing live music with it.

The successful restaurant moved from North Broadway because it had outgrown its original space, where it cut its teeth



Willie's owner Wilson Sebastian sees a lot of upside to the new location.

on barbecue and local music. Owner Wilson Sebastian describes Southland as having "a lot of soul" and "hip, yet down to earth."

He said much of the patronage from Willie's previous location had come from residents of the Southland area. "They are very enthusiastic that we are part of their neighborhood now."

And Sebastian sees the area as having even more potential with the addition of the new Hampton Inn. "The future is so bright for Southland," he said.

Each year the Southland Association holds an annual public meeting at the Oleika Shrine Temple to share information about what has gone on in the past year and upcoming projects and events. Among recently added events is an annual street fair, intended to increase awareness of the area and its businesses while bringing together residents to share in music and food. Baumann said she hopes the Southland Jamboree will move back to the neighborhood. The series moved to Beaumont's MoonDance Amphitheater after its space near Southland's bowling alley was developed.

"We are trying to improve the community and connect people to what they need," Baumann said. **KM**

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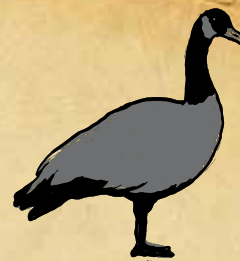


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