



\$16.5M plan breathes fresh life into Waites

by JESSE CHAMBERS May 24, 2016



An artist's rendering of The Waites, a \$16.5 million retail and residential project under construction at the corner of Seventh Avenue South and Richard Arrington Boulevard.

The developers of The Waites, a \$16.5 million retail and residential project under construction at Seventh Avenue South and Richard Arrington Boulevard, promise quality housing and upscale eateries oriented to UAB medical residents and graduate students.

But the project will also pay homage to the site's iconic past and may even help speed the arrival of the area's walkable, urban future, according to Rodney Barstein, chief development officer at Birmingham's Retail Specialists.

Retail Specialists received approval for the project May 11 from the city's Design Review Committee. Retailers should start opening in early spring 2017 with apartments available in May 2017, according to a recent news release from Retail Specialists.

The Waites will have 16,000 square feet of ground-floor retail and 45 apartments — 31 one-bedroom units and 14 two-bedroom units. The location of the apartments, about two blocks from UAB Hospital, makes them “ideal for medical, dental and optometry students as well as medical residents and interns,” Barstein said in April.

“We will be catering to people who get off at 2 a.m. and want to be in bed at 2:05 a.m.,” Barstein said. “We are offering tremendous convenience for students who want to be that close to UAB Hospital.”

Tenants announced so far are Farm Burger, a Georgia-based grass-fed burger joint; Blaze Fast-Fire'd Pizza, billed as the country's biggest build-your-own pizza chain; and Smoothie King.

The developer is looking for additional restaurants that are unique or upscale, according to Barstein.

"Farm Burger [is attractive] because they are a high-end organic-type product," he said. "They will set the stage for the rest of the retail in the development. We have turned down other retailers or restaurants who don't fit that mix, so to speak. Farm Burger, Blaze — there are certain types of co-tenants they want to be around because they feed off each other. You don't see a Saks Fifth Avenue and a Dollar General in the same mall. We are trying to be cognizant of that."

The development's name is an homage to the building's history as Waite's bakery, a Southside institution for about 60 years until it closed in 1988.

The developer — working with architect Bill Segrest of Williams Blackstock Architects — is making every effort to preserve as much of the original character of the Waites Building as possible, Barstein said.

They will do so by using a sizeable portion of the original limestone façade. During demolition, workers "delicately" removed the limestone from the building, Barstein said. After the Design Review Committee meeting, he said about 75 percent of the limestone was in good shape and could be reclaimed, and of this portion, the builders were able to save about 95 percent for use in the new structure.

Developers may put up some sort of plaque describing the building's history and efforts to reuse some of the original materials, according to Barstein.

Efforts to preserve the historical character of the building are personally important to Barstein.

"I guess because of the memories it brings to people like me who remember the Waite's bakery and Waites Building when they were kids," he said. "It became kind of an iconic corner. Everybody knew where the Waites Building was. As we get older, we don't want to let go of things from our childhood history."

Residents at The Waites should not lack places to eat, given the tenants in the building, as well as the numerous other establishments in the area, according to Barstein.

"And with the new Publix supermarket four blocks away, that takes away the last main objection for people who didn't want to live downtown," he said.

While undergraduate students are welcome at The Waites, "the pricing and the upscale features will cater to the graduate student or professional," according to the company's news release, which also said the apartments will have features usually found in "upscale hotels and apartments, as well as the latest technology for the Millennial generation."

The project may have a long-term positive effect, one that contributes to making the whole area more walkable, according to Barstein.

"Eventually, I think this project will help over time to bridge the gap between the Lakeview area and UAB," he said. "If you keep going down Seventh Avenue, you get to Lakeview. I think eventually you will see some development fill in between. There may be more of a flow between the two areas. Maybe that street will become a more pedestrian street over time."

The retail component facing Seventh Avenue South will have outdoor covered dining for the various restaurants, and there will be parking provided for the retail and residential portions.

More retail tenants are in the offing for The Waites, according to Barstein.

"We're working on two leases now (with) three spaces left of the eight total spaces."