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Group has high hopes for Melrose Avenue, a 'stunning street' on edge of Capitol Hill

▪ *Here's the plan: Raise about \$1.5 million to turn a mile of Melrose into a promenade, with sidewalks, seating, lights, art and landscaping.*

By BENJAMIN MINNICK
Journal Construction Editor

Mike Kent moved to Seattle from New York City in 2009 so his wife could attend graduate school at the University of Washington.

Kent had worked as an urban planner back east and thought he could find work here in that field, but the pickings were slim.

But being unemployed gave him time to look around his Capitol Hill neighborhood, and he started jogging along Melrose Avenue, about a block from his home. Those jogs gave Kent dazzling views of downtown, the Space Needle, the Olympics, Queen Anne and Lake Union.

Then his urban planner training kicked in.

"The views from (Melrose) are among the best in the city, but the public infrastructure doesn't do the view justice," he said.

Kent was inspired and set off to do something about the problem, creating a plan for a promenade on Melrose.

With the help of a \$20,000 grant through the Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation, the Melrose Promenade project has become a community effort to improve about a mile of Melrose between Pike Street and East Roy Street, with wider sidewalks, seating, lights, art, trees and other landscaping.

The promenade would continue north through Bellevue Place Park to Lakeview Boulevard East.

Kent said his group is called the Melrose Promenade Advisory Committee, and the project has a website: melrosepromenade.com.

Central Seattle Greenways has been a key player and architect GGLO has done some pro-bono work.

Something called the Melrose Connector Trail exists today. It runs from Roy through the park to Lakeview, and is used by pedestrians and bicyclists. It would also be fixed up as part of the promenade work.

Kent said the backers would also like to improve some adjoining spaces, such as the grassy hillside north of Roy owned by the Washington State Department of Transportation.

Some work could involve upgrading the old staircases that provide pedestrian links between



Melrose and the terminuses of East Republican and Harrison streets. Kent said the staircase at Harrison needs more work than the one at Republican.

Melrose is the lowest point on Capitol Hill and the flattest option for walking and biking from Lakeview Boulevard and the Lakeview overpass to the Pike/Pine commercial district to the south.

Kent says the promenade and other upgrades would create a "front porch" for Capitol Hill and connect neighborhoods to the north and south.

About \$13,200 of the grant will be spent on a consultant to develop concepts for the corridor and lead three meetings to gather public input.

The group put out a request for qualifications from consultants that appeared in the DJC on Oct. 3. Kent said they have received about 25 responses so far. The deadline for submittals is Wednesday.

Kent said the goal is to hire a consultant in November and have a final plan finished next March. The rest of the schedule depends on funding.

Point32 CEO Chris Rogers said his development firm gave some seed money to the group to help hire staff and kick off the project with a series of volunteer cleanup events over the summer.

Point32 is developer and part owner of the BelRoy Apartments, which is adjacent to Melrose. The restored art deco building will open in January with 52 renovated units and 61 new ones.

Rogers said one goal of his company is to enhance the neighborhoods where it has projects.

One big issue for any promenade plan is noise from Interstate 5, which runs just to the west of Melrose.

"You're never going to forget I-5 is there, but that doesn't mean we can't make Melrose Avenue a better street to walk along," Kent said.

Rogers was project manager for the Seattle Art Museum's Olympic Sculpture Park on the waterfront. He said the sculpture park is similar to Melrose in that it is next to a noisy transportation line: railroad tracks.

Rogers said they embraced the idea that the sculpture park sits next to active railroad tracks. "We proved that open space and recreation is compatible with transportation," he said.

People using the Melrose promenade will feel and hear the energy of the freeway, Rogers said. "It's really a stunning little street."

One idea Rogers suggested was to pull the Melrose Connector Trail back to the eastern edge of Melrose to separate it more from I-5. "There's really a great opportunity there to create an urban trail," he said.

I-5 offers one big asset: It drops off dramatically below Melrose, so there are no buildings to block the western views.

"It's really an incredible view and it's only getting better," Kent said.

Melrose Promenade backers are seeking \$750,000 through the Opportunity Fund administered by Parks and Recreation. In December, the group plans to seek another \$750,000 through Bridging the Gap, run by the Seattle Department of Transportation. It also is accepting donations through Seattle Parks Foundation.

Kent said the group should know in mid-2013 if they'll get funding. He said it's possible the project could cost more than \$1.5 million.

Rogers said the proposal will be fairly costly, but work can be done in phases as funds become available.

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