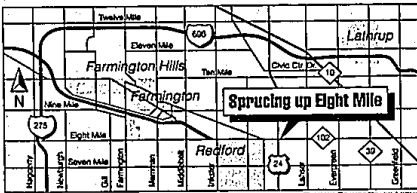


Eight Mile Road: Moving toward better days



BY RALPH R. ECITINAW
STAFF WRITER

What would Dorothy Gale say if she were walking along Eight Mile Road instead of the Yellow Brick Road? "Hookers and bandits and thieves, oh my!"

Well, the Eight Mile environment isn't quite that hazardous (at least in daylight), despite the propensity of many to believe otherwise.

Certainly the aforementioned undesirable professionals occupy the boulevard to some extent, but none were in evidence on a recent Monday during several trips up and down the road between the eastern edge of Southfield and the western reaches of Farmington Hills during daylight hours.

With the exception of a few topless bars on the Detroit side, like Trumpp's, Body Rock and Fatal Attraction, Eight Mile Road is a lot like any other busy commercial artery in metro Detroit.

From the Finnish Center in Farmington Hills to the Northridge Commons strip mall in Livonia to R.J. Leeds Furniture in Redford to Livorno's Auto Glass & Body Repair Co. in Southfield, the ambience of Eight Mile is embodied in an amalgamation of the businesses along-side of it.

Working for change

Granted, the word "ambience" may connote a more aesthetically

pleasing environment than a typical Eight Mile Road vista brings to mind, but an outfit called the Eight Mile Boulevard Association aims to change all that.

Formed last April, the association is an alliance of 13 communities, three counties and the state transportation department. The idea is to encourage cooperation between the many local governments, businesses and residents who occupy the 27 miles of Eight Mile Road from Lyon Township to Eastpointe.

With one staff member, \$90,000 collected from annual dues and one \$50,000 federal grant so far, the association is hardly a juggernaut, but its effect and presence are beginning to be felt.

The federal grant has been used to build a "prototype landscaping island" on Eight Mile between Ferndale and Detroit, association director Sharlan Douglas said. Basically all they're doing is adding trees and flowers to what's already there, but they hope to extend the treatment up and down every portion of Eight Mile divided by a median.

Shopkeepers and homeowners are important to the plan, too, Douglas said. "We really need to contact and listen to the business owners and residents." In fact, she said, "I would love it if they called me." You may reach Douglas at 585-2643. With no secretary on hand, she's likely to answer her own phone.



Windshield washer: Lon Matthews has been cleaning windshields on Eight Mile at Southfield Freeway since March. He's there every day from about 9 a.m. till 7 p.m. or until he gets enough money to take care of his needs for the day. He says that Southfield police are generally very kind to him. Sometimes they bring him breakfast.

It's different

When one drives up and down Eight Mile between Haggerty and Greenfield, it becomes apparent that parts of the avenue need less attention than others.

In Farmington Hills for example, there's a place called the Finnish Center where folks of

Scandinavian descent meet and socialize. Inside there's a gift shop stocking many things with the Finnish word "sisu" (meaning guts) on them, and everything is very pleasant and cordial.

Across the street is Northridge Commons, a nearly new strip mall where landscapers plant flowers and occupancy is near capacity. Livonia resident Rita Borrelli, who mans the counter at CCS Jewellers, waves toward the Detroit side of Eight Mile and says, "There's probably more news down there. This is a nice area."

The Redford Zone

The bucolic splendor of Eight Mile fades somewhat when one moves into the Redford Township zone. An R.J. Leeds Furniture store just east of Beech Daly is an exception, stocking top-of-the-line items as well as couches for less than \$250. Munger Guy Hipwell said Eight Mile Road is a good location for R.J. Leeds and business has been good. "I don't think (Eight Mile) was ever as bad as some of the stories you heard," he said.

But it's hard to miss the abandoned gas station at Eight and Greenfield, and many of the other businesses are hardly harbingers of prosperity, what with their cement block construction and

painted-on signs.

However, one must trek east of Telegraph before a plethora of signs screaming "LIQUOR," "CHECK CASHING" and "Michigan's Most Beautiful Dancers" make their presence felt. These are mainly on the south side of Eight Mile, where bars and liquor stores are plentiful.

On the north side in Southfield you'll find mainly commercial businesses; places like Tire Wholesalers, D.O.C. national headquarters, Livorno's Auto Glass and Belvedere Construction Co.

We do good work

Maurice Lezell, who owns Belvedere Construction and has played "Mr. Belvedere" in TV commercials for 30 years, said he's "very happy" to have his business located on Eight Mile Road and would "recommend it to anybody." Although Lezell characterized Eight Mile as "very safe," visitors to his office have to ring a bell so that a secretary can unlock the door so they can enter.

Down the road a few blocks at Livorno's Auto Glass an employee who requested anonymity said Eight Mile Road life is better in Southfield than Detroit. Although one can be sure that any hitch-

hiking woman along Eight Mile "is in a dire emergency or a prostitute," the man said, the hookers stay on the south side of the road. "The big batch of them are down there on the other side of Greenfield," he said, attributing the lack of hookers in Southfield to diligent police.

So what is on the other side of Greenfield, anyway?

Just across the Southfield line in Oak Park is the Koeppinger's bakery and adjunct thrift store where one may buy fresh bread, cakes and Danish for half of what grocery stores get. Carol Schwendemann has worked behind the counter there for eight years. "It's a little store, but it's busy constantly," she said. "I love working here, and I love the people I meet in here. Ninety-nine percent of the customers who come in here are terrific."

Schwendemann, who lives in Warren, drives to work every day on Eight Mile, which she says is much more lightly travelled since I-696 opened.

She has also noticed something that the Eight Mile Boulevard Association would be happy to hear.

"People are starting to do something with the fronts of the buildings," she said. "I think it's starting to turn around."



Could be better: Freddy Kashat, owner of G & J Party Store in Farmington Hills said that since I-96 opened business has not been as good. Before the freeway opened all the traffic would come right past Kashat's store on Eight Mile Road.

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