



On the mend

Expanding clothing store dresses up East Side

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Community and business leaders in southeast Fort Worth have put the old adage 'it takes a village' to a practical use as they have circled around a local business owner trying to expand his retail store in the area. And in August all parties involved plan to celebrate a successful TIF use and a long-empty building re-entering the tax rolls at the grand opening of the new Men's Collections clothing store on East Berry Street.

Kee Song, owner of the well-known Men's Collections at 3007 South Freeway, plans to open his new store at 1108 E. Berry St. in 16,000 square feet of space following more than \$800,000 in property renovations. But Song says the finished product is the work of a community.

Song said he realized last year that he needed a bigger space for his men's apparel shop, which he opened in Fort Worth in 1981. Song first leased 2,500 square feet of space at 3007 South Freeway in southeast Fort Worth and has since grown to 6,800 square feet of retail space. Even so, his needs were bigger.

"This area is growing," he said, adding that the new building is on a "prime street" and in close proximity to his current shop. "I needed a bigger place, but I wanted to stay around here where I am established," he said. Men's Collections sells everything from hats, belts and shoes to suits and men's apparel. Catering largely to the black consumer, Song said his new location will offer expanded space on items he already carries with the addition of sports shoes – Nike, to be exact.

"I am working now to get the Nike brand for the new store," he said. "We don't carry any sports shoes now and Nike will be huge. From kids to adults, people like the Nike."

Song is definitely well-known in his community, but not only by those who frequent his store. For the past several years, Luther Perry, founder of local nonprofit Umoja Fort Worth, which educates and mentors local at-risk adolescents, has known he can count on Song to provide a suit for a youngster with an important event and no funds for a suit.

"I just help them when they need it," Song said. "If they have something they can't afford, if unexpected things happen like a funeral or if they have no formal clothes for a prom, Umoja knows they can call me. It's not much, but it helps." Perry said the effort means more than Song thinks.

"If we've got a senior or a junior and the parents can't afford a suit, a tie, Kee will supply it no questions asked," Perry said. "That takes a lot. He knows he's part of this community and when that kid goes to prom, he feels good about himself and that is important."

It was this kind of community spirit that led other leaders to Song when he was thinking of expanding. Andre McEwing, president and CEO of Southeast Fort Worth Inc., said one of Song's customers introduced the two last year.

"I knew about the store, but I had never shopped there before," McEwing said. "I do now."

McEwing was able to help Song tap into TIF 12, the East Berry Renaissance TIF, created in 2006 specifically for southeast Fort Worth development. Other notable benefactors to date of the TIF are the All Church Home, Sierra Vista and Renaissance Square – three of the area's biggest current projects. McEwing said after presenting to TIF boards and other city boards, the TIF and other development incentives will pay for about \$240,000 of Song's costs – but not without a few questions, he said.

"We presented and a few people would say 'you're going to do what?'" McEwing recalled. "We had to really show them what we were wanting to do because Mr. Song has been here for 30 years and he was ready to make an investment, but some entities don't hear much in our area. Eventually, they came around."

Song purchased the building in November 2009 – no small feat, said Anthony Burks, president of Vendigm Cos., which is general contractor for Song's new building.

Though financing was sought from several local banks, Burks said Song had a long string of rejections. "Here you had a successful local businessman wanting to do something good for the area and to expand his store and we couldn't get it financed," he said. "Mr. Song had money in the bank, but that didn't matter. Banks didn't want to lend money in this neighborhood. But then we met with Tim Carter at OmniAmerican and he listened to us. And he saw the project and OmniAmerican stepped up. Tim's a fan of this."

With financing in place, Song went back before the TIF board to present his request in late 2009 and was approved. Song's new building, which has operated as a gas station and a bingo hall in its lifetime, had been vacant for about 10 years and was city-owned.

Plans for the building have included gutting the structure down to the cinder blocks and doing some environmental cleanup on the property as well as adding a stucco façade to the top to add an architectural element. Construction is estimated to take four months with plans for an August opening.

The finished product will include a completely renovated building, a new parking lot and new landscaping. "This means a lot for the area," McEwing said. "It leaves a good impression on retailers looking in, seeing that someone like Mr. Song can prosper and see some good numbers here. This is an area that buys and people need to know that." McEwing said the renovation also has more of an impact than a new build would have for the area.

"This has given this building new life instead of just tearing it down," McEwing said. "You strike a match, a lot of things happen. You get the good in and the bad out."

Burks agreed, adding that it's important for city and business leaders to pull together to support each other – especially in today's economic climate.

"It's like the stock market – you see the momentum picking up and here they come," Burks said. "For me, personally, this is an example of a city-owned property that was foreclosed and would have sat there for a long time, but Mr. Song saw it and with the help of Southeast Fort Worth and our city leaders through the TIF, we're getting it back on the tax rolls and that's what it's all about."

Song said he is excited to move his business to its new location and said it would not have been possible without the guidance of people like McEwing, Burks and a handful of others.

"I am happy to open the business in my own building," he said. "It's nice. I want to invest in the community that has invested in me."