

# Orange Loop developers say best is yet to come in Atlantic City neighborhood

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ATLANTIC CITY — Three years ago this month, a yoga shop called the Leadership Studio opened as the first new venture in an economic “dead zone” on Tennessee Avenue, serving as a catalyst for what would become known as the Orange Loop.

Looking north to Asbury Park and west to Philadelphia as models for urban transformation, developers and local officials envisioned a walkable downtown area complete with independently-operated restaurants, bars, retail, entertainment and housing, spread out over three beach blocks and nestled between Atlantic City’s glitzy Boardwalk casino hotels.

“The Orange Loop really is a social experiment, a demonstration, to show people what is possible in Atlantic City because a lot of people just don’t see it,” said Pat Fasano, an Asbury Park-based developer who was among the first to take a gamble on reimagining what was possible in a city dominated by casinos. “Sometimes it takes a fresh set of eyes to come in (and) see something that maybe you didn’t see before.”

The Orange Loop — named after the color of St. James Place, New York Avenue and Tennessee Avenue on a traditional Monopoly board — has become one of Atlantic City’s go-to destinations, particularly throughout the novel coronavirus pandemic, when it proved to be a viable alternative for locals and visitors alike while the city’s casinos were closed.

“I think people are excited about this new Atlantic City,” said Evan Sanchez, co-founder of Authentic City Partners, a local development and investment firm. “People have been wanting to see this for a long time in Atlantic City.”



The vision for the Orange Loop is far from complete as developers continue to invest in the area and work toward introducing new concepts that complement existing Atlantic City staples, such as the Irish Pub and the Pic-a-Lilli Pub.

Fasano recently began construction of a shipping container hotel, courtyard and bar on New York Avenue to complement his Cajun-themed restaurant Bourré. He said there are plans for live entertainment venues at the old Dreams Cabaret building and behind the Boardwalk tramcar garage on New York Avenue.

Just up the block, Sanchez and his business partner Zenith Shah are gearing up to reopen Hayday Coffee on the street level of a rehabilitated mixed-use building that includes a two-story boutique hotel and a cannabis dispensary.

“Our goal at Authentic City Partners from the start has always been to start small, create a scalable model and grow that,” Sanchez said. “We’re going to really be able to create the model that we had in our mind’s eye of a downtown district, a place with great energy, great food, drink, entertainment, all of those things together. That’s the key — to bring all those elements together in one concentrated place.”

The new projects are in addition to a handful of others that, prior to the pandemic, had started to establish themselves as must-visit Atlantic City destinations. Places such as Anchor Rock Club, a live entertainment venue by Philadelphia-based developer John Longacre, or Mark Callazzo’s variety of food and beverage concepts on Tennessee Avenue, have transformed the Orange Loop from a pie-in-the-sky idea into something that is beginning to resemble a real downtown district in the heart of Atlantic City.

“Our goal was to really make this Main Street,” said Callazzo, co-founder and CEO of Alpha Funding Solutions and operator of the Tennessee Avenue Beer Hall and Rhythm & Spirits. “If you’re looking to open a business or live (in Atlantic City), this area should be where you want to be.”

Callazzo said business at the beer hall was up nearly 30% this summer, with only outdoor dining and takeout available, compared to last year, proving the Orange Loop concept is working. An expansion of the outdoor area at the beer hall is in the works, and a gourmet-style pizza parlor will be joining the food options along Tennessee Avenue soon, he said.

The reason for the aggressive expansion, Callazzo suggested, was that the perception of those three blocks has successfully changed, making additional investments both practical and profitable.

“The area has changed positively, very dramatically, over the last few years,” he said. “There’s definitely been a lot more interest from outside developers in the past year. Obviously, COVID-19 put the brakes on some of those plans, but I see people and projects starting to come back.”

Fasano, who made his name and wealth by being an integral part of the Cookman Avenue renaissance in Asbury Park, said Atlantic City has much more to offer investors than the Monmouth County city. Twenty-four hour liquor licenses, an abundance of parking, federal tax credits made possible by Opportunity Zone designations and the affordability of property all make Atlantic City an attractive proposition, he said.

When Fasano, Pat Schiavino and a few others first started investing in and around Cookman Avenue nearly 20 years ago, they encountered skepticism and bewilderment about why anyone would want to put money into an economically depressed area. Fast-forward to today, and Cookman Avenue is a vibrant, energetic downtown thoroughfare with a variety of retail, dining, entertainment and living options that helped transform Asbury Park. Fasano said the same thing can, and will, happen in Atlantic City.

“I can’t believe I don’t have a ton of competition,” Fasano said with a wry chuckle. “I’m just going to keep shouting it until I do have a ton of competition, (because) the more competition I have, the more money I’m gonna make, because that’s what happens when the competition comes in.”