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## Is Castleberry Hill 'the new Buckhead?'

By **PAUL DONSKY**

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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It's 8 p.m. on a steamy weekday evening, and Atlanta's Castleberry Hill neighborhood is already hopping.

Fashionably dressed young people pack 255 Tapas Lounge, a brand-new hot spot on Peters Street, the district's main drag. A few doors down, hip-hop music thumps inside Slice, a super-chic pizza joint where flat-screen TVs hang on the wall and live DJs spin tunes.



ALLEN SULLIVAN /  
aesullivan@ajc.com

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Traffic has been increasing along Peters Street, Castleberry Hill's main drag, as new nightspots have opened and the Atlanta neighborhood has become more of a destination.

The sidewalks teem with revelers laughing, flirting and chatting. Castleberry Hill is, in a word, hot.

But down the block, Erica Pines sits in her condo and stews. She frets that her neighborhood, known for its hip lofts and trendy art galleries, is turning into Party Central.

"We're becoming the new Buckhead," she said. "It's awful. It's just awful."

Pines, 36, president of the Castleberry Hill Neighborhood Association, runs through a litany of problems: Noise blares at all hours of the night; cruisers have taken over the streets; crime is up; discarded fliers and other debris litter the sidewalks.

"It's not part of our master plan to become a bar district," she said. "We really believe our neighborhood is a jewel, and we'd like to keep it that way."

Now, Castleberry Hill residents are taking steps to protect their turf.

They've worked with local political leaders to craft legislation that would limit the number of new bars and restaurants able to open. They've also filed complaints

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Takia Robinson takes a break from working at Slice restaurant, on Peters Street in the Castleberry Hill neighborhood. Robinson lives in the neighborhood and says the district's nightlife doesn't bother her, but she understands why some of her neighbors are upset.

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The neighborhood continued to develop in an eclectic fashion this decade and is now home to about 1,100 people. In the span of just several blocks, a sushi bar now sits near an old-school barber shop, a couple of trendy urban fashion boutiques and a Mexican restaurant popular with downtown office workers.

But over the past several years, Atlanta's nightlife landscape has changed. Buckhead's once-thriving hip-hop party district shut down and is being redeveloped into a high-end shopping area; meanwhile, several popular Midtown clubs closed.

The party scene had to move somewhere, and much of it appears to have landed in Castleberry Hill.

Heather Konitshek, 29, lives in Buckhead but often comes to Castleberry Hill to hang out. She said the Buckhead scene had gotten out of hand and prefers Castleberry Hill's more relaxed mood.

"The way Buckhead was, I remember it was really wild," Konitshek said. "But this is more artsy. [Castleberry Hill] is like a lounge, Buckhead was like clubs."

against restaurants accusing them of illegally operating as nightclubs. Two proprietors have court dates in September.

But some business owners say they're being unfairly targeted.

Sitting at a small table at the front of jam-packed 255 Tapas Lounge, owner Cortland Jackson said the issue boils down to demographics. The mostly white

homeowners in Castleberry Hill aren't happy that the neighborhood is attracting such a young, African-American crowd, he said.

The conflict has "class and racial overtones," said Jackson, 36. "At the end of the day, [neighborhood residents] don't like all the young, black people."

Steve Messer, a Castleberry Hill pioneer who moved to the neighborhood 15 years ago, said residents didn't have a problem until the last couple of years. A scene that had mostly attracted black students from the nearby Atlanta University Center changed, drawing a more hardcore party crowd, he said.

"The college kids are really well-behaved," said Messer, 47. "It's the other group of people who don't go to college — either they don't work or work very little — and all they want to do is party. That's the element we are dealing with now, and it's causing a lot of frustration."

Messer and his partner bought a 17,000-square-foot building in 1993 for \$165,000. It's now appraised for \$4.3 million, he said.

"When you have that kind of investment, you want to protect it as much as you can," he said.

Castleberry Hill, set along the railroad tracks just southwest of downtown, was a run-down warehouse district until the 1990s, when artists discovered the neighborhood and began converting old buildings into studios and homes. High-end condo projects and art galleries soon sprouted.

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Atlanta City Councilman Kwanza Hall, whose district includes part of Castleberry Hill, said the area's growth should be planned in a way that will allow the district to thrive without becoming so large that it overwhelms the neighborhood.

He has proposed an ordinance that would prevent any new establishments serving alcohol from opening in Castleberry Hill within 250 feet of another such facility. The ordinance would also increase the number of required parking spaces for restaurants and bars and limit hours of operation to midnight on weekdays and 1 a.m. on Friday and Saturday nights.

"We're trying to spread [the party scene] out a little bit, so it's not so concentrated," Hall said. "All of Atlanta cannot party in Castleberry Hill. That's not fair."

For now, the party scene is centered on a small stretch of Peters, a two-lane road that often becomes clogged with bumper-to-bumper [traffic](#) as people search for scarce parking spaces or just cruise up and down the strip.

Henry Davenport, owner of Studio 281, a jazz club on Peters, said it gets so bad some nights that it scares off his mostly older clientele, threatening his 11-year-old business.

"It's too congested, it's too packed," said Davenport. "The people are just so unruly and disrespectful."

Though it only recently opened, 255 Tapas Lounge has already become a central hangout. Built in a dramatic space that once housed a homeless services center, it boasts exposed brick walls, an outdoor patio and huge front windows that swing open, allowing music to spill out onto the street — and sometimes into nearby apartments.

The restaurant's manager says the windows are closed each night around 9 p.m. in an effort to be a good neighbor, but some residents complain about the crowds and the noise, saying the place is really more of a bar than restaurant.

Latron Thorne, a 32-year-old real estate entrepreneur, loves the atmosphere and the surrounding neighborhood.

"I am glad to be at the forefront of the upcoming area," said Thorne, who was having drinks at the lounge with a friend. "There are a lot of places you can eat and drink; there are a lot of cafes with wireless Internet access if you want to work there."

Staff writer Sierra Brown

contributed to this article.

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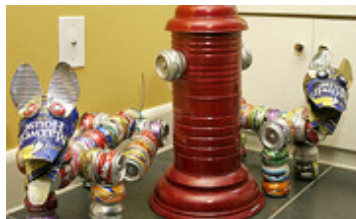
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