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Sixth Street merchants' goal:
Save skid row
Like generations before them, three San Francisco immigrants are staking their American Dream on a blighted neighborhood. Will risk-takers like Kaushik Dattani, whose Hindu restaurant opens Saturday, be able to reclaim one of The City's most neglected areas? | SEE 4A

Sixth and Success

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When Dehi Donnelly told his bartender friends back at the upscale Irish Bank that he was opening a place on Sixth Street, they said he was mad.

"They said, 'Why are you going down to that crazy part of town?'" Donnelly recalled.

The 27-year-old from County Armagh had an easy answer: At $2,000 a month, he and partner Brian Sheehy could pay the rent.

"Go two blocks over and you're paying $10,000," said Donnelly, pointing toward downtown. "Any young guy trying to go into business can't jump into the city center. You have to take a chance. I never expected it to be easy."

One person's blight is another person's business opportunity. That seems to be the story on the much-maligned Sixth Street.

Just when much of the business community seemed to give up on the drug-infested stretch of Sixth between Market and Harrison, two immigrants have moved in, investing sweat equity -- and plenty of the regular kind of equity -- to reinvigorate a tired old dive and a pawn shop.

The result is a tropical-feeling Hindu vegetarian place called Haveli Restaurant and a sleek, hipster Irish venue called Anu.

Haveli will start serving up its all-you-can-eat Thali specials on Saturday, and Anu -- named after the Irish goddess of hope and fertility -- started pulling perfect pints and toasting sandwiches at the start of the month.

"If I didn't have faith in the street, I wouldn't be putting money into it," said Haveli owner Kaushik Dattani.

A couple of new businesses do not a renaissance make, but Anu and Haveli did not open in a vacuum. They were encouraged by a new $750,000 urban planning initiative called Six on Sixth, which the nonprofit Urban Solutions is working with the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency to fund.

Under the plan, businesses on Sixth Street between Market and Harrison would be eligible for low-interest loans or outright grants. The idea is to brighten the street with new signs, awnings, paint, windows and entrances.

The $750,000 would be only the start. After the initial outlay, The City would invest another $1 million a year for five years.

"I think there is a feeling within The City and government that it's time to devote resources to Sixth Street," said Jenny McNulty of Urban Solutions.

The challenges facing Sixth Street are considerable. While the police in Southern Station have been cracking down on drugs and prostitution in the several blocks that make up the area, the fact remains that it is home to more than 965 single-room-occupancy units in 19 hotels, many of which are occupied by drug abusers and the mentally ill.

The storefront renovations have to be made in concert with the introduction of social services into the SRO hotels, said Urban Solutions founder Roger Gordon, who has taken a leave from his post to run for the Board of Supervisors.

Sixth Street retail space, most of which is beneath SRO hotels, rents for about 75 cents a square foot, but costs as much as $100 a square foot to renovate because of years of deterioration.

"Would you spend $100 a square foot to renovate space you're going to get 75 cents for?" Gordon asked.

Thirty-five businesses dot the street, leaving about 30 percent of the retail space vacant.

Dattani, an Indian raised in Kenya, is hoping that Sixth Street will become Indiatown. "The Indian culture is the only culture in The City which does not have a center," he said.

Dattani also pointed out that many of the hotels in the Tenderloin are owned or run by Indians. "The Indian community is here but not visible," he said.

Dattani is used to overcoming adversity. His wife died of cancer seven years ago, forcing him to learn to cook so he could feed his three young children. He figures if he can run a household on his own, he can tackle whatever problems Sixth Street will throw at him -- especially if he has some help.

"Only you and me can save the street, not an angel from City Hall," Dattani said.