

Hispanic community getting its turn in spotlight

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The sign appropriately reads, "This Route Designated as Avenida San Juan." After all, thousands of Spanish-speaking people from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba and other Latin American countries live in the Lower West Side community along Avenida San Juan – also known as Niagara Street.

New sidewalks, repaved streets and bike lanes are proposed at West Huron Street facing northbound.



And a portion of it – about 1.1 miles, between Niagara Square and Porter Avenue – has been designated a Hispanic Heritage District by the City of Buffalo, which is also working on a rehabilitation project for that portion of Niagara.

The improvement plan includes new sidewalks, repaved streets, lighting, bike paths and welcome signs. A request for proposals could go out as soon as late fall, and by spring 2014 the rehabilitation work could begin, organizers said.

It's just one of a few projects putting

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a spotlight on Western New York's Hispanic community. Another is the new \$200,000 memorial that pays tribute to Hispanic American military veterans, which opened last month. And a new Spanish-only cable television talk show, a first in Buffalo, debuted this spring.

"A lot of good, positive things are happening in the community," said Casimiro Rodriguez, president of the Hispanic Heritage Council of Western New York.

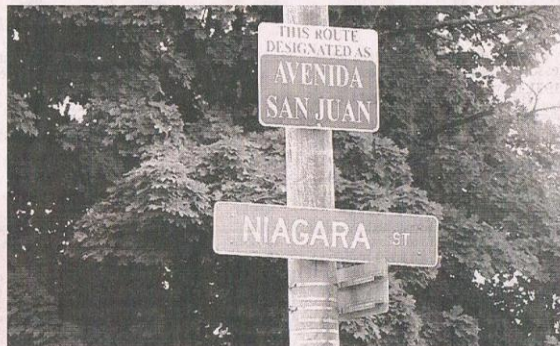
Of the 41,731 Hispanics in Erie County, 27,519 of them live in Buffalo and the number is growing, officials and community leaders say.

In July 2012, the Common Council approved a resolution creating the heritage district on Niagara Street. The designation is a recognition, though it does not allow for tax credits or any other incentives for home and business owners, said Niagara Council Member David A. Rivera.

Still, the city has plans for the district. In cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration, it is rehabilitating Niagara Street. The plan includes pavement widening, repaving, new street lighting, traffic and pedestrian signals at Carolina and Georgia streets and at I-190 and Virginia Street, lanes for bicycles and pedestrians, traffic safety features and landscaping.

Also planned are "welcome signs, murals, new bus shelter, synchronized lighting," Rodriguez said.

The cost estimate for the improvement project is \$4.7 million from Buffalo. An additional \$4.5 million will come from the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority to improve the Niagara Street strip past Porter Avenue up to Ontario Street, Rodriguez said.



Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News

Niagara Street is designated as Avenida San Juan as a part of projects spotlighting Buffalo's Hispanic district.

Last month, the heritage council and Holy Cross Catholic Church hosted a public meeting at the 7th Street church with officials from the city's departments of Public Works and Strategic Planning, the NFTA and the Olmsted Parks Conservancy.

Drawings, photos and project facts were on display as officials sought comments on the proposed plan from individuals, groups, officials and local agencies. Their thoughts, comments and suggestions from the public meeting were due back by late last month.

A draft design report is available at 501 City Hall for public review.

The attention lower Niagara Street is getting also has a lot to do with its status as the first main street that visitors run into when they arrive from Canada on the Peace Bridge, officials said.

"This area is very important for our

community and very important for the City of Buffalo because it's the first impression of our city," Rodriguez said. "It's a gateway to America."

The district also is a "very important business corridor, like Delaware or Elmwood" avenues, said Rivera, who sponsored the July 2012 resolution that created the Hispanic Heritage District.

"I want to make sure that when people arrive in Buffalo from the Peace Bridge, that what they see is spectacular," said Rivera, who also was the first guest on a new Spanish-language talk show that launched in April on Time Warner Channel 20.

"LaVoz de WNY" is a public affairs program that runs 6:30 to 7 p.m. on Thursdays and 1 to 1:30 p.m. on Saturdays.

The public affairs show was created by Maria Rivera, a Puerto Rican native who is not related to the coun-

cilman. Rivera is a diversity program assistant at Roswell Park Cancer Institute, where she created a program for Latino employees called the Hispanic Employment Network Resource Group. The group's purpose is to get the hospital connected with Hispanic employees and the Hispanic community.

In addition, she is planning to launch a live radio program with the same Spanish-language format to try to reach people who miss the cable access show.

"What I'm trying to do is give an opportunity for people who only speak Spanish," she said.

One of the guests on this month's "LaVoz" is Dr. Raul Vazquez, who runs Urban Family Practice on lower Niagara Street. Vazquez addressed health issues like hypertension, asthma and diabetes on the show.

He said "LaVoz" reaches a market that traditionally hasn't been touched and that it can be used to integrate residents who speak only Spanish into the mainstream.

"If you can speak Spanish, you can pretty much survive on the West Side. But a lot end up having issues" when they go beyond those borders, he said.

Vazquez also pointed out that Spanish-only television networks – like Univision – don't provide local information, which is another reason "LaVoz" is important.

"They can get information on what's going on in Buffalo, what services are in Buffalo, he said. "In light of the growing number of Hispanics ... it's a good way to bridge that gap."

"It's a way to communicate to our community," said Councilman Rivera, who was the guest for the first show in April.

The councilman also provided \$10,000 in seed money for the new

WNY Hispanic American Veterans Memorial, which was unveiled last month at the Buffalo & Erie County Naval & Military Park on the waterfront. Situated in front of the USS The Sullivans naval war ship, the tribute is a life-sized, three-dimensional sculpture of a female soldier standing alongside a male comrade as they pay a final tribute to a fallen soldier.

The two figures are facing a Battle-field Cross that is pointed downward into the ground and represents a soldier killed in action. A helmet is atop the rifle, and at the bottom are a pair of combat boots that represent the last march of the battle.

Also recognized on the memorial are the 65th Infantry Regiment, a predominantly Puerto Rican unit nicknamed "The Borinqueneers," and the Gabriel A. Rodriguez American Legion Post 1928.

The memorial was the idea of Ventura Colon, a Puerto Rican native who grew up in Buffalo and makes it a point to stop at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial whenever he goes to the Washington, D.C., area to visit his sister. Each time is a very emotional experience for Colon, especially when he remembers some of his childhood friends who fought in Vietnam with him – two of whom contracted agent orange-illnesses, he said.

On one of his trips a few years ago, Colon wondered what it would take to get a monument built here that honors Hispanic American military veterans from Western New York.

His idea came to life on June 14 when the memorial was unveiled.

"We had to do something to recognize all of these people," Colon said. "All of these friends and neighbors and sons. We served honorably."

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