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Report: Public-private coalition would aid boro business district

By DAVID POLAKIEWICZ
Staff Writer

BERNARDSVILLE—The most pressing need of the borough's business district is the development of a partnership between officials and the private sector to work on problems facing the district.

That was among the conclusions of a report on the business district recently submitted to the Planning Board by consultant Donald Smartt of The Community Advocates.

The 21-page report was compiled by Smartt in conjunction with Stephen Davies of the New York City-based Project for Public Spaces.

The report calls on borough officials to form a coalition with the Bernardsville Business Alliance (BBA), Citizens for a Better Bernardsville (CBB) and other groups to work specifically on business district issues such as aesthetics and pedestrian access.

According to Planning Board Chairman Waiter MacWilliams, the board, BBA and CBB will sponsor a joint meeting sometime next month for public discussion of the report.

"The most fundamental need in the business district is for a partnership based on the strong support of both public and private sectors," Smartt wrote. "In Bernardsville, the weaker link has been the public sector, which has not come to fully appreciate how important a healthy downtown is not only to the quality of life but to maintain and increase a substantial portion of the community's tax base.

"There are clearly things only a municipal government can do in the areas of planning, traffic, and other town services, such as administering the local zoning ordinance, providing police and sanitation services, and monitoring traffic circulation and signalization," Smartt added.

"This does not mean that the borough alone is responsible for the success of business downtown," the study continued. "In the past few years, the Bernardsville Business Alliance has been not just reactivated, but rejuvenated. In fact, the recommendations of this report with regard to retail mix, promotion, and recruitment

can largely be implemented by the BBA with little or no support from the borough government.

"When support is necessary for other projects and programs, however, it should be more obtainable in a less bureaucratic manner than at present," Smartt wrote. "For example, regular meetings between the public and private sectors will foster better communication between the borough and business communities."

In addition to calling for public-private cooperation, the report mentions other steps that should be taken regarding the business district. They include:

- Preparing a detailed market analysis of the business district to determine what type of retail businesses are needed.
- Preparing an overall design master plan for sidewalks and other improvements.

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Donald R. Smartt
Principal, The Community Advocates

- Conducting a workshop on storefront and signage designs for retailers and property owners and drawing up a list of "dos and don'ts" regarding signage.
- Working with property owners to develop a long-term planning strategy for the borough's Route 202 commercial corridor.
- Working with Mayor Peter Palmer and community to identify appropriate uses and designs for the new building he plans to construct in place of the fire-damaged structure at the corner of Route 202 and Mount Airy Road.
- Working with county and state transportation officials to adjust downtown pedestrian signals.
- Developing a parking strategy for downtown employees.

The report also discusses the current state of the borough's business district and mentions the

significant changes of recent years.

According to the study, nearby shopping malls and larger business districts such as the ones in Morristown and Somerville helped contribute to a decline in the number of retail establishments in Bernardsville between 1977 and 1987.

The number of retail business in the borough dropped from 96 to 73 or 24 percent during that period, the report said. The number of apparel stores dropped from seven to four, food stores from eight to five, and automobile stores from eight to five. Only furniture stores—from seven to nine—increased in number during the 10-year period.

"Such losses clearly show there is less opportunity for residents of the borough to find the goods and services needed by their families within their own community," Smartt wrote.

The report applauds the formation of a sign committee to advise merchants and the placing of flower barrels placed downtown by the BBA but said more steps need to be taken to improve downtown aesthetics.

Inexpensive streetscape improvements would enhance the downtown district, according to the report.

"What is needed is a plan to upgrade the design over time and an equitable funding source determined between the borough and property owners," the report reads. "Local service groups and citizens should be encouraged to donate benches, trash receptacles, perhaps even a fountain or sculpture for Olcott Square."

Action is also needed regarding aesthetics on the Route 202 retail strip east of Olcott Square, Smartt wrote. "Signage color, typography, and placement often clashes with the historic traditions of the community" the report said. "Trees and landscaping are inadequate. Many locations lack sidewalks entirely, or have sidewalks that are far too narrow so that even if a person wanted to walk, it would be difficult."

The study also suggests the realigning of exits and entrances along the Route 202 commercial strip, including sidewalks with those improvements.



Don Smartt and The Community Advocates