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A plan to drive customers back into town

Bloomfield hopes Home Depot revives district

By KELLEY HEYBOER
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

BLOOMFIELD—There was a time when Jim Healy would do nearly all his shopping in nearby stores along bustling Bloomfield Avenue.

These days, the 40-year Bloomfield resident drives the eight miles to Willowbrook Mall in Wayne to make the majority of his purchases.

For him and many other residents, stores in the hometown shopping district just don't hold the allure they once did.

"You come here for odds and ends. For your big stuff, you go to the malls," shrugs Healy, 69. "These small businesses don't stand a chance."

Like many downtown shopping areas, Bloomfield's city center has been struggling to stay afloat as changing businesses go downscale and residents flock to malls.

However, municipal officials and business leaders say things are about to turn around.

"We're very close to turning that corner. Within a week, you'll start to see construction of the Home Depot," Mayor James Norton told a group of business owners at the Chamber of Commerce's annual awards luncheon. "I think once you see that first building go up, you'll feel a lot better and the town will seem a lot better.

Home Depot, a warehouse-style hardware store, expects to open its doors late this year on the site of the former Schering-Plough Corp. drug research plant off the Garden State Parkway.

Though some shop owners said they fear the chain superstore will steal some of their already dwindling business, Norton is banking that the Home Depot will anchor a revival of the shopping district and attract

other large chain stores to vacant factory and warehouse buildings that once drove the town economy.



At mid-afternoon, Bloomfield Avenue, the center of Bloomfield's business district, is almost deserted.

"We've generated the activity, now it's up to the retailers," Norton said of the pending arrival of Home Depot.

According to the Chamber of Commerce, 10 small businesses have opened in town since January. Most are small restaurants or service establishments, not high-profile trend stores that draw enough shoppers to support a business district.

Several storefronts remain conspicuously vacant in the town center at Bloomfield Avenue and Broad Street, including a nine-story office building with an old "For Rent"

sign in one of its arching windows.

"As that building comes back to life, it most certainly would help the rest of the center district," said Chamber of Commerce President Richard Bzdek.

Last week, a consultant began a \$10,000 municipal study of the central business district, Bzdek said. The establishment of Special Improvement District are among the options the consultant will explore.

The improvement plan makes some business owners cringe. Under the proposal, property owners in the district will pay additional taxes to make capital improvements to the area in hopes of jump-starting the retail revival.

An improvement plan was established in 1987, but failed when the committee controlling the funds collapsed in political infighting.

Kristina Mickelson, owner of Animal Instincts, a pet supply shop, said she and other local business owners are weary of town officials' plans to revive the retail area. Beautifying the district will not fill empty buildings, and the higher taxes may raise rents and drive away already established businesses, they noted.

Developer Frank Lee, who along with his son was honored last week by the Chamber of Commerce for their family's investment in the town, said despite questions about the local economy, he is hopeful for the future of Bloomfield.

"The merchants have to come up with some kind of attractive gimmick," Leo said. "I think business in Bloomfield is good. The township is well located in the county and has good transportation to all the municipalities in the district."

Star-Ledger staff writer Susanna Chu contributed to this report.°



Don Smartt and The Community Advocates