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## Plan to revitalize Bloomfield Center revolved around access

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**BLOOMFIELD**—The downtown Bloomfield of the future is a place where families can go to find almost anything they need without having to leave the township's borders.

After parking at the new 600-space parking deck at the site of the old Royal Theater, mom can walk to a retailer like Ashley Stewart or The Loft to pick up a few items while dad takes his daughter to the Kids Spot or Foot Locker to grab some summer clothes.

Afterward, the family can meet at Charlie Brown's restaurant for dinner and grab a mocha cappuccino at New World Coffee.

And, if the newly issued recommendations of the Bloomfield Center Alliance are followed, says the group's project director, Don Smartt, it can all happen in the next five to seven years.

"The residents of Bloomfield are tired of hearing that the center is dead," Smartt said. "They are ready to shop here if we give them what they want."

A five-month study conducted by the Atlantic Group found that residents take their shopping dollars elsewhere because there is poor signage and a lack of traffic circulation, clear direction to public parking and attractive presentation by downtown stores. The Bloomfield Center Alliance wants to change that. They are offering up a series of detailed recommendations designed to bring some life back to downtown Bloomfield—commonly known as Bloomfield Center.



Photo by Rich Krauss

The Royal Theater, now closed, reflects the stagnation in Bloomfield Center. Under a plan, parking would replace the building.

**Finding parking might also be a little easier if the town instituted a loop system designed to smoothly move shoppers through downtown, Smartt said.**

If Bloomfield Center is to thrive, parking is a must, Smartt said. Plans for extra parking include tearing down the old Royal Theater and acquiring four or five neighboring buildings to build a 630-space parking deck with 15,000 square feet of retail space.

The Farrand Street parking lot would also be redeveloped to include 50,000 square feet of retail space as well as additional parking.



And the parking is going to be necessary, especially when NJ Transit begins a Midtown Direct service in a few years, and if the office building at 2 Broad St., considered a key to downtown redevelopment, is ever fully occupied.

"For years we've had a parking problem in Bloomfield," said Councilman-at-large Tim Kane. "If you put parking next to retail you are giving people even more of an incentive to shop." Finding parking might also be a little easier if the town instituted a loop system designed to smoothly move shoppers through downtown, Smartt said.

Many streets in the center prohibit left turns, which makes it difficult to find the parking lots. Under the plan, the center would be split into two loops—the College Loop, which would include Municipal Place, Franklin Avenue and



Don Smartt and The Community Advocates

Liberty Street—and the Station Loop, which would be made up of Ward, Farrand and Conger streets and Lackawanna Avenue. The intersection of Liberty and State streets would be redesigned to create a “T-shaped” intersection. Broad and Liberty streets and the Franklin Avenue intersection would also be re-designed to fit into the loop.

Traffic signs telling a driver he was in Bloomfield Center and pointing the direction to the parking lots would also help. Parking meters would be free after 1 p.m., and property along Bloomfield Avenue and Washington Street would be converted into additional parking. In addition, many merchants had requested that the NJ Transit bus stops once located along Bloomfield Avenue in the center be returned. With the loop system and the plan to return left turns to Bloomfield Avenue, the bus stops are fine where they are, Smartt said.

“Patrons can’t access parking from certain spots on Bloomfield Avenue because you can’t make a left,” Smartt said.

“Returning left turns to the center may mean a return to vitality for many avenues.”

Once the parking is straightened out, the township needs to attract the types of retailers that will make Bloomfield residents and people from neighboring towns spend their money in the center instead of in Upper Montclair or in Willowbrook Mall in Wayne.

Regional and national retailers and restaurants such as 9 & Co., Blockbuster and MicroExchange seem to be the answer. “We’ve done enough surveys and the message is that if there are the right types of retailers downtown, people will come,” Kane said.

“We believe it will soon make a lot of sense for retailers to be in Bloomfield,” Smartt added.

But existing merchants wouldn’t be forgotten about, either.

Under the group’s proposal, a special improvement district would be formed. Merchants would be eligible for tax abate-

ments and grants to make facade and other improvements to their properties. A marketing component would be put in place to promote Bloomfield Center, along with a plan to make the permit process faster and easier.

“There’s a lot of work that needs to be done on some of the buildings, and this would be an improvement,” said Alan Rappaport, owner of Economy Shoes in Bloomfield Center. “When you go into a town that looks nice, you are more prone to stop and look around.” The town council still has to look at all of the recommendations and decide how to implement the plan. But Kane said that after years of talking about how to revive the center, that bridge will be easy to cross.

“We all know that what’s good for business in Bloomfield is good for Bloomfield as a whole,” he said.

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