

# Sunday Star-Ledger

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## Bloomfield gets serious about reviving its center

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STAR-LEDGER STAFF

**BLOOMFIELD** — It was a Wednesday night there was a packed house at Bloomfield College's Van Fossum Theater.

There was no theatrical production, just a serious dialogue between about 75 town residents and land use specialists on what needs to be done to revive Bloomfield's downtown area.

"I thought the downtown had a lot of potential," said Carmen Alara who moved to Ashland Avenue from New York City with her husband eight months ago. "But it seems people would rather go to the mall."

Alara is a quick study.

Bloomfield's downtown, once a busy merchandising area, is now struggling to get a few of the cars that speed by on Bloomfield Avenue everyday to stop and take a look.

Theories about why residents and other nearby shoppers would rather drive to the mall than shop in the area, commonly known as Bloomfield Center, are abundant.

Some residents at the meeting talked about how the lighting in Bloomfield Center was not conducive to night time pedestrian traffic. Others said the lack of a unified theme and an anchor to draw people into the district was a problem.

The stores that people want to shop at just aren't there. There is a lack of parking and the signs are poorly organized, residents say.

"I very rarely shop in the center because it has nothing I need," said Anne Prince, who has lived in the

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*Donald R. Smartt  
Principal, The Community Advocates*

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Watsessing Heights with her family for 13 years. "There just aren't family friendly places."

"The center is all adult stores. There's nothing for us kids to do, so we just hang around," said 16-year-old Daniel Pope, a junior at Bloomfield High School.

But these complaints aren't new. Town officials and residents have been discussing how to jump-start the center for two decades. A special improvement district was set up and squashed in the late 1980s.

Now, the Bloomfield Center Alliance, a group dedicated to helping to revitalize the downtown, is trying to solve some of those problems. The complaints haven't



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changed, but the circumstances and situation certainly have, said Don Smartt, project director for the 2-year-old Alliance.

"There's never been a concerted, ground-up, public and private partnership and that's what we have this time," Smartt said.

An area study is being performed by the Atlantic Group and the final product—a report with three-year planning goals and an immediate action plan—should be out at the end of March. Residents and business owners hope it is the first step toward breathing life into the area.

"The way a town like Bloomfield is planning is a great way to start," said Patrick Henry, principal of the Atlantic



Don Smartt and The Community Advocates

Group which is coordinating the study. "With all these issues popping up, this is a very logical step."

Henry said once the study, known as a concept plan, is complete, Bloomfield will have an advantage in gaining state and federal improvement funds over towns without a plan.

Such studies were the first step to helping towns like South Orange and Red Bank develop cohesive downtown plans, he said.

And Bloomfield does have several factors that make the town a prime place to shop. It is located near a major transportation hub with the Garden State Parkway and NJ Transit stations. The Montclair Connection, a new rail link that will bring direct rail access between Bloomfield and Manhattan, is also expected soon.

There is also an easily identifiable, though under-utilized, anchor.

One thing that was always easily agreed upon by local businesses and town officials discussing the revival of the downtown was that the Frank M. Leo building at 2 Broad St, is the area's flagship building.

But after Mid-Atlantic Bank and the hundreds of people it employed left the building over a decade ago, that flag has been at half mast.

The seven-story building with 65,000 square feet of space was unoccupied except for PNC Bank on the ground floor. And last year the bank cut its occupancy from 16,000 square feet to 3,500 square feet to stay competitive amidst falling deposits.

"The chamber would talk about how the building was empty and the owner would say the building was empty, but no one would do anything about it," said Councilman-At-Large Timothy Kane.

Those days seem to be gone.

After years of false starts, the building at 2 Broad St. is rumbling with life again after 75-employee medical billing company filled the third floor with its flagship headquarters at the end of last year.

Now, Bloomfield College is considering taking up another two floors with a professional computer training center.

Henry said the area, where six different



PHOTO BY JERRY McCREA

**2 Broad Street is now being considered as an anchor for Bloomfield's downtown revival.**

streets converge, has served as the town's focal point since at least 1848.

"Two Broad was identified as being extremely important because of the sheer volume of land and space it occupies," said Smartt. "It was a natural priority that everyone could agree upon."

Along with the building's new owner, a commercial realtor, town officials and an architect, the goal is to attract clients interested in renting the building.

An example of the willingness to work with clients came when Armanti Financial Services, a medical billing company, was looking for somewhere to place its headquarters. Access to public transportation and major highways were both priorities, according to Bill Colgan, managing partner of Armanti Financial Services.

Since the Garden State Parkway is just a few blocks away along with a NJ Transit station, 2 Broad Street was a prime location for the building's first new occupants in 10 years.

There was just one problem.

"Parking was a major issue," Colgan said.

The building does not have an adjacent parking lot to accommodate employee parking.

In the first such agreement the town has performed, Armanti Financial Services has worked out an agreement to use a nearby municipal lot on Farrand Avenue.

For every 1,000 square feet of space leased, the building's occupants gain three more spaces. Arrangements can be made to acquire more spaces.

"Just setting up this parking situation has been a very big deal because the town has never done it before," said Judith Cohen, vice-president of Jacobson, Goldfarb and Panzman Co., L.L.C., a Woodbridge commercial realty firm. "The more people we have coming in to work, the more who will shop."

Cohen said that the building still needs some renovations to bring it up to more modern standards, but the layout, architecture and design of the building are big pluses. Perhaps the building's biggest asset is its location in the heart of downtown.

"We like the convenience of being in the downtown area," Colgan said. "Bloomfield is a bargain. We are feeling our decision was the right decision."

Nick Zois, 68, owner of Roxy Florist on Glenwood Avenue for the last 46 years, has never regretted being situated in Bloomfield Center.

Zois, who was in the middle of Thanksgiving rush last week, said the business is not what it used to be but not bad enough for him to leave. The dialogue and planning that are in the works are encouraging.

"I've seen ups and down and I've seen better times, but we are moving along and I'm still stable," Zois said. "I'm pleased that there are efforts to create some sort of activity. I hope this time next year there will be even more."