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Bloomfield makes clear downtown renewal is real

Special district to boost cleanliness, safety, facades, parking, marketing

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FREEHOLD—Jeff Beam toured several towns in Essex County before deciding to open his new trophy business on Glenwood Avenue in Bloomfield.

West Orange, Verona, Montclair and Nutley were all attractive options, but Bloomfield was more centrally located, the rent was cheaper and the town had redevelopment plans in the works, including a special business improvement district, that appealed to Beam's business sense.

"When I heard what was going on in downtown through my real estate broker, I got interested and very excited," said Beam who opened his store in May. "I think I will be more successful because of what's happening than if nothing was happening."

After years of stalled and abandoned plans to beef up Bloomfield's downtown business district commonly called Bloomfield Center—several concrete moves signal that the town is serious about its plans.

First, the old Royal Theater was torn down to make room for parking and retail space. Then, the town approved a special improvement district—covering about 400 properties—that will collect \$200,000 per year for facade, maintenance and marketing programs in the center through a special assessment on those properties.

Last week, the town conditionally approved a developer, Forest City Daly of Cleveland, to handle the process of bringing retail and residential space to a 13-acre area bounded by Ward Street, Bloomfield Avenue, Glenwood Avenue and Lackawanna Plaza, that the town deemed in need of redevelopment.

Many people agree it looks to be real this time.

"I've heard about something happening for the last 15 years and nothing has ever really happened until now," said Paul Giuliano, owner of Giuliano's Luncheonette on Washington Street.

Yesterday, surrounded by a group of business owners at a cele-

bration of the moves the township is taking to improve the center, Giuliano asked questions about the specific steps involved in the redevelopment process.

Right now, the alliance is looking to hire two maintenance workers for the district. In addition, the group presented business owners with three logo choices. A concert series to draw people downtown after business hours is also slated to start.

There is \$60,000 approved for a facade improvement matching grants program. The Alliance also wants to promote Bloomfield as an excellent place for Internet businesses because the needed infrastructure is in place.

Planning and management are the main differences between this attempt to revitalize the downtown and others, said Councilwoman-at-large Martha Skinner.

Don Smartt, head of Community Advocates, which assisted the Alliance since inception, said the town is on the right track after five long years. Smartt continues to serve as a consultant to the Alliance.

"Perception counts. The perception of a town that doesn't care about its downtown hurts. The perception that a town wants to help itself is a real boost," Smartt said.

But there's a lot more work to be done. In the next few months, Forest City will have to present the town a redevelopment plan.

The council will approve, deny or recommend changes to the plan.

Business owners last night said they'd like to see the center open later and immediate parking solutions.

"We've got to get people to shop in Bloomfield again and to

do that we need quality stores and diversified stores," said Councilman-at-large Vince Esposito. "If that happens, property values will rise. Taxes will come in more steady. It snowballs."

And the town is already reaping the benefits of development efforts. The downtown's flagship building, 2 Broad St., is up to 60 percent to 70 percent occupancy, which means more people are spending money downtown. In the last few months, new businesses have opened in the center, including the Lost Picture Show Theater and a GNC.

The Community Advocates assisted Bloomfield Center Alliance in creating and implementing many successful development programs to enhance the downtown district.

