

Dateline Journal

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Speeding up Main Avenue's revitalization

By MARIARUSSO & RICHARD DICKON

CLIFTON—In the most sweeping change yet, the City Council initiated a plan Tuesday to accelerate the revitalization of the Main Avenue business district by declaring the district a redevelopment zone.

With the council's support approved at Tuesday's public council meeting, the city may declare the zone, which would allow for condemnation and purchase of properties, which would be offered to private developers along with economic incentives to come to Clifton, according to officials. Declaration as redevelopment zone makes the city eligible for federal redevelopment funds to use locally.

The next step is the city Planning Board to review the plan give recommendations on whether to pursue the zone, and what prop-

erties to include for changes of use that will best stimulate economic activity in the area, according to City Manager Robert Hammer.

The redevelopment zone support comes at the same time a market study evaluating all of Clifton's business areas has been

released. The study suggests the city concentrate on providing the best possible convenience-related services, such as food, drug store and newsstand products (see related story on market study).

Council members suggested stretching the redevelopment zone

across the entire length of Main Avenue through the city, from Crooks Avenue bordering Paterson to Highland Avenue up to the Passaic city line.

While no specific buildings were agreed upon for inclusion in

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The Community Advocates is coordinating the revitalization of the Clifton's business zones

Main Avenue merchants pushing for arts center

By RICHARD DICKON

CLIFTON—While the Christian Victory Fellowship Church's proposal to convert the vacant Clifton Theatre into a place of worship has been delayed for a month, the church group's lawyer defended the plan, and questioned plans for an arts center or large "anchor store" at the site.

Michael Rudolph, the church's attorney, also made it clear that the theater would be used only by the church for church activities, negating comments by city officials hopeful would allow some community use of the theater.

The church's application to allow the church as a permit-

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City needs convenience type service says study

By RICHARD DICKON

CLIFTON—The completed market study of the city's downtown business areas recommends a focus on providing convenience-type services, including food and drug store businesses, and supports acquiring properties for possible use as anchor stores for the north and south ends of Main Avenue.

Donald Smartt of The Community Advocates, the firm hired by the city through \$50,000 in grant money to coordinate the revitalization of the city's business zones, highlighted the major points of his firm's study, which included surveys of merchants and shoppers.

The market study is part of

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Main Avenue Revitalization

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the redevelopment zone, Hammer said the Clifton Theater building complex will be appraised as options are considered. He had warned the governing body in a memo that this was their last opportunity to acquire the Clifton Theater, a proposal made after a letter from the Lakeview Civic Association stating the group's support having the theater turned into an arts center.

The move comes as a decision on the Christian Victory Fellowship Church proposal to convert the theater into a worship space was delayed by the Zoning Board on Wednesday until at least March 18, when the church (see related story on the church).

Hammer proposed the acquisition of the theater, making it eligible for federal dollars as part of the declared redevelopment zone, using a revolving loan fund, interest free. Also, money from the loan would be reimbursed with funds generated from rents on the site.

"The theater is looked upon as one element of a multi-element program," Hammer said, "It is integral as part of Clifton and Main Avenues, at the busiest intersection on the street."

The City Manager called the redevelopment zone for Main Avenue "The biggest challenge the city is facing as we enter the millennium."

Mayor James Anzaldi called the redevelopment zone "a smart thing to do for Main Avenue." Anzaldi has been part of an effort to make the city more attractive to business using a "proactive approach that has brought developers to vacant properties, including a senior citizen friendly housing complex on the former Shulton industrial property and a project for the former BASF property.

City Economic Development Director Robert Rizzotti said a deal to bring a drug store chain to the Clifton Camera site on Main Avenue is eminent, as is a one-hour photo store at the site of vacant professional storefront on the avenue.

The town developments are proof that the cooperative effort is working among his office, the Main Avenue Steering Committee, neighbors, developers and brokers.

"I'm confident this thing is going to take off and one reason is the completion of the market study along with the active partici-

pation on the Main Avenue Steering Committee," Rizzotti said.

Speaking at a Steering Committee member at Tuesday's meeting, Patrick DeLora of Deluxe Cleaners, said the committee's goal is "identifying what actions should be taken to assure the best future both for the business district and the community of which it is a part."

The Steering Committee is helping coordinate a \$1.8 million facade/signage improvement plan, along with the market study and a cooperative effort including corporations with local offices.

Councilwoman Gloria Koladziej has been calling on the council to coordinate a plan for the entire business district for two years. "This will force the council and the planning board to look at the big picture for this area, and not to do things piece meal," she said, "I look at it (the redevelopment zone) as a good vehicle to give a revitalization (to Main Avenue)." She said she would like to see a tax abatement program along with the zone.

Councilman Donald Kowal said, "We should not just look for another business but for an anchor store." The market study recommends the city take advantage of any opportunity to acquire properties that may be used to attract an anchor store. The theater is one possibility, as is the Herald & News building, and the factory and pool that surround it near the Passaic border, according to the report.

DeLora said the steering committee agrees that acquisition of the theater for use by the city, with attached retail and commercial uses, would serve the major points of the city's market study. The theater would help link Main and Clifton avenues as a commercial core, and could act as an anchor to draw people to the district.

Currently the city collects \$18,500 a year in rent, and the cost to buy the theater complex, including rooms upstairs and five separate store fronts and a parking lot, plus renovation of the theater, would cost approximately \$1 million. The loss in taxes would be offset by rent and the plan does not erode the city's tax base.

Hammer's plan for the theater would have the city lease the upstairs rooms to either a non-profit performing arts foundation or a for-profit performing arts school, while the stage could be used for community theater, local band and/or dance recitals. The proposal was well received by the council.

The concept of turning the theater over to the city and giving the area an arena for the arts attracted the support and attention of local residents, as well as Main Avenue merchants.

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a multi-pronged approach that also includes three-year cooperative effort proposed to recruit corporations with local offices, a \$1.3 million Main Mall Sign and Facade Grant Program already underway, and the prospect of one of Main Avenue's best-known attractions, the Clifton Theatre, becoming a local arts center (see related stories).

"The study basically says that all three business districts (Main Avenue, Clifton Avenue/Lakeview section and Botany Village) are in a very, very competitive area, where within 10 miles you have about 1,000 stores and 10 million square feet of gross leasable space, including nine regional and four 'super-regional' business centers, all of which pose significant com-

petition," Smartt said.

Since the huge amount of close-by retail limits the size of the retail trade area, Smartt said any suggestion that the Main Avenue and Clifton Avenue business sections can compete against each other will mean "both will lose." The two need to link and form a commercial core as the

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geographical center and create a pedestrian-friendly, centrally-located area.

With about two thirds of all customers residing in Clifton, and shoppers generally spending about a third of their income on everyday items, the area should then look to strengthen a niche with potential customers as a center for everyday conveniences, such as grocery, drug store and newsstands by adding more such retail convenience stores. Four distinct demographic areas are targeted in the study: senior citizens, commuters, office workers and visitors to professional offices, and residents who speak a language other than English at home.

Seniors eat out and shop locally more often than average consumers; commuters increasing shopping and convenience purchases; serving the needs of office workers and visitors; and providing business recruitment and customer marketing incentives to attract households where a language other than English is spoken are all mentioned in the study.

"It should be seen as a stop, where you can get what you need and be on your way, Smartt said, "People who are coming are not walking the avenue. They're shopping and leaving. There is a demonstrated ability to draw local residents. We need to draw on that."

The study contains several strategies to build on the existing customer base, to attract area customers more frequently. Many of those customers now shop the Main Avenue section less because of immediate competition from the Lakeview and Route 46 areas, along with Wayne's Willowbrook Mall, Smart said.

"What we have to do is build up the convenient aspect, since Main Avenue is close, by giving shoppers more reasons to come," he said.

As part of the support, the city needs to focus on professional services, including medical, financial and real estate services, that draw potential shoppers from a larger, wider geographic area. About 40 percent of shoppers say they came to the city to visit professional services, and those businesses can be marketed as a magnet to bring in repeat shopping.

Little room for growth in retail sales exists, unless it can be diverted from Route 46 business to Main and Clifton Avenues, with Route 46 businesses compensating for the losses with more regional shopper dollars, thanks to its strategic locations as an east/west thoroughfare, according to the study.

Perhaps the most unexpected, new information contained in the survey is the realization that Clifton Avenue is attracting more shopper traffic than Main Avenue, and the Lakeview section is continuing to get stronger. That data underscores the need for Main and Clifton avenues to work at being thought of together, as one shopping district, Smartt said.

Much discussion continues among city officials and business owners about the need for anchor stores at either end of the Main Avenue corridor, including the Clifton Theatre (see related stories). The study notes that if the opportunity to assemble properties for location and construction of an anchor store arises, the city should pursue. "But we don't make a big deal out of it, because there are just the two opportunities," Smartt said, referring to the Clifton Theatre along with the Herald & News building, Clifton Swimming Pool and factory buildings, all at the south end of Main Avenue. Those properties have all been rumored as possibly being for sale.

The most logical anchor store categories are supermarket, large family-style restaurant and apparel/general merchandise, according to the study. An anchor store should be able to bring in 250 "destinations," or visits into the area per day, which Smartt said would increase the number of stops into nearby businesses in the area.

On the residential side, any of those south end properties could be used as a residential anchor, most likely as senior citizen housing. Smartt also mentioned the soon-to-be-vacant Givaudan-Roure factory and corporate headquarters on Delawanna Avenue as a potential residential housing project.

Such residential properties "increase flat income of a community that's getting older," Smartt said.

The city's middle class income is dropping because of a combination of retiring residents and low-income households, according to the report.

Other topics addressed in the study but not discussed by Smartt, include:

- Marketing and promotion, including the creation of an updated business directory brochure to be distributed to target audiences, including senior citizens
- Highlighting civic issues, like health fairs or events like the Christmas tree lighting
- Physical enhancements, including strengthening access in the commercial corridor, by improving the connection between Clifton and Main avenues; along with visually connecting the entire commercial district through consistent signage, lighting standards, street trees and holiday lights and a gateway signage program promoting civic pride and promoting the area as the city residents' own "downtown." This is already beginning with the new street lamps as part of a \$1.8 million facade improvement program paid for with federal dollars. Also, access either by bus or on foot should be a focus, with improved bus shelters, clearly posted bus shelters and continuous sidewalks linking residential neighborhoods to the downtown. Improved parking convenience and the appearance of storefronts and interiors rounds out the physical enhancement recommendations.

While Smartt did not address Botany Village, the study itself states "once the center-piece of a thriving community, it is now struggling to maintain tenants in the shadow of a major retail development, which offers only competition, rather than an opportunity for partnership in the economic affairs of the area." Market "visions" for both Lakeview and Botany Village are the subject of separate memos not yet released.

Overall, Smartt said the study did not sugarcoat the problems facing the area, but instead provides possible attainable goals.

"It would be nice to say that Clifton is in a direct line to invite shoppers with rising income and an interest in comparative shopping, but that's not true," he said.

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ed use was delayed until March 18, when a final ruling can be made. The board voted to delay the hearing because a traffic consultant's report was not available, according to officials.

Rudolph said once all of the reports from the planner, police, fire and traffic reports are complete, he expects "a small amount of additional testimony, then the board can vote."

Patrick DeLora of Deluxe Cleaners is a member of the Main Avenue Steering Committee, helping coordinate the attempted revitalization of the business district, recommended to the City Council at Tuesday night's meeting that the city purchase the theater for use as a performing arts space, with attached retail and commercial use (see related stories). The move satisfies recommendations made in the market study linking the Main and Clifton avenue business centers and providing a possible anchor (see related stories), DeLora said.

DeLora said the committee's stand "should in no way be construed as a personal stand against the (church.) On the contrary...we believe that (the church) would have every intention of being a good neighbor. In fact, we encourage the city to provide any assistance possible to help the congregation find another suitable building within the community.

Rudolph said, "We have a contract to purchase the theater, we meet all the criteria and we expect a favorable outcome." He said the use of the theater as a church is "a permitted use," but the hearings are for "sort of" a use variance.

The church has provided additional copies of the previous meetings' transcript, since Rudolph said the city failed to provide the names of four property owners within 200 feet of the theatre property. "I don't know if they have availed themselves of the copies," he said Wednesday.

The church had already been before the city's Zoning Board, facing very little opposition, until the city council agreed to investigate the idea of acquiring the theater.

The Lakeview Civic association, along with the Main Avenue Steering Committee, the group looking to revitalize the downtown business center, have both called for either an arts center-type use or the acquisition of the area for use as a possible anchor store to increase shopper "foot traffic" in the area.

Rudolph said either a performing arts center or large retail anchor store would face obstacles to success.

Rudolph said he grew up in Passaic and is familiar with the business history of the area. A performing arts-type center would mean stores, which now are closed in the evening on Fridays and Saturdays, would have to be open at night, while an upscale anchor store, like a department store, would not have nearly enough parking and goes against a market study prepared on the area, as pointed out by the church's planner, he said.

"If they think upscale stores are going to work, I think they're wrong," Rudolph said, quoting numbers from the market study done by Clifton, which shows more than 80 percent of all disposable income being spent on items other than apparel. The study recommends a focus on providing convenience-type stores (see related story).

The church will use the theater day and night, every day, but "not in huge quantities," Rudolph said, and some churchgoers would also be shoppers at various times.

The Main Avenue Steering Committee shifted away from the church group, purchasing the theatre property after it became clear the group was not interested in allowing use of the theatre as a public facility, Russo said.

The committee is looking to bring in a diversified group, as opposed to the same church people, in the hope the area could be made a lot more well-known, like the Nutley movie theater and surrounding businesses on Franklin Avenue in Nutley.

"It will be used for a church," he said, "the uses (church versus community arts center) are incompatible. When you go inside, you'll know you're inside a church."

The church is considered "an inherently beneficial use" by the city's zoning ordinance, according to Rudolph, who said the city "will look to us as a pivotal part" of redevelopment plans.

Rev. Joseph Cantanese, Pastor of the Fellowship Church, has "kept a low profile" Rudolph said, because of concerns that any statements he makes can be "misconstrued," according to Rudolph. He called the Pastor a "personable" leader of the church, which currently meets at the YM-YWCA in Passaic.