

Fair Lawn and Clifton Upgrading Lagging Corridors

Help in an uphill battle to lure shoppers back from the malls.

By RACHELLE GARBARINE

TIME has not been a friend to neighborhood commercial corridors. Once places where residents flocked to do business, they have been drained of some of their luster and prosperity as malls and strip centers siphoned away patrons. A roller-coaster economy over the last decade has also taken a toll.

But rather than continue at the mercy of such forces, a few communities are pursuing revitalization programs for their lagging corridors, just as has been and is being done for downtowns. Such corridors generally comprise a jumble of businesses — from individual shops and retail strips to professional offices and even industry — stretching for blocks and lining a main thoroughfare in the community.

Campaigns are under way on River Road in Fair Lawn in Bergen County and on Main Avenue in Clifton in Passaic County to give the old streets a new image more in tune with the 1990's and promote more commerce.

At least from a retail perspective, that may not be easy.

"Though traffic at malls is decreasing, these corridors, like downtowns, have an uphill battle to attract customers," said Kurt Barnard, a retail analyst based in Scotch Plains. "They have to offer something other than just stores." Even that will only slow — not halt — the decline, he said.

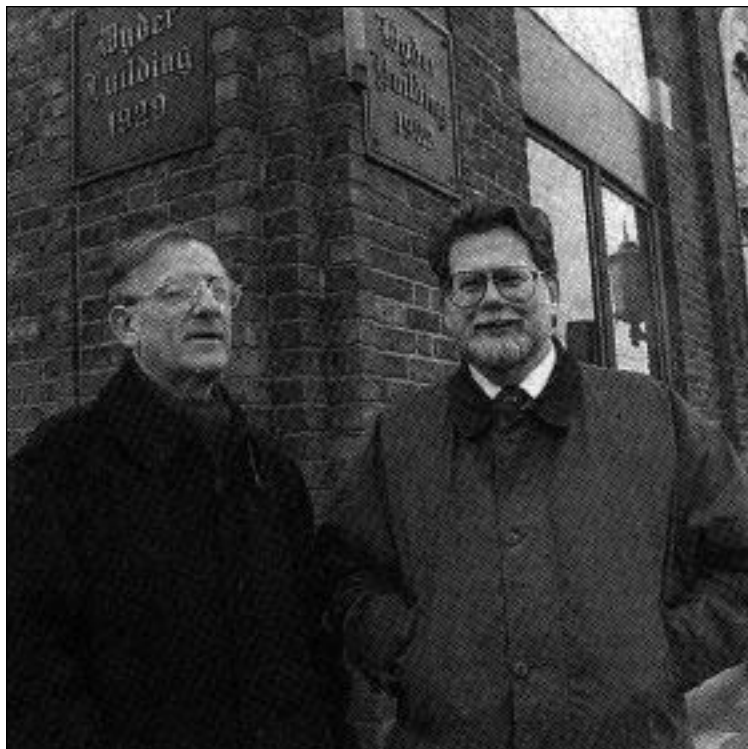
Still, officials in Clifton and Fair Lawn say the efforts will help maintain the tax base in their communities and make them more attractive places in which to live, work and shop. Each,

however, is taking a different approach.

In Fair Lawn, business leaders with the borough and county as partners last April began an \$8 million, three year campaign for River Road, the oldest of five commercial corridors in the community. The project also includes two blocks of Fair Lawn Avenue. Financing is coming from public and private sources, including \$300,000 from a group of businesses to cover operating costs for the nonprofit River Road

Improvement Corporation, which oversees the program. "The key is the private sector's involvement," said Donald R. Smartt, president of Downtown Managers, a consulting firm in Verona, who is working on the River Road program. "There's never enough public funds for such efforts, and it insures the program can survive changes in local leadership." He said that forming a Special Improvement District would be considered after three years. A 1984 state law lets communities set up such districts, in which property owners tax themselves to finance improvements as well as services, including marketing to spur business.

River Road runs for a mile and a half through Fair Lawn's western section past houses, offices, shops, service businesses, a retail strip and some manufacturing plants and labs. The 150 businesses that fill its midsection, many in former homes, comprise a weary hodgepodge, worsened by poor lighting and road conditions, according to a report by the



Donald R. Smartt, a consultant, far right, met with Arthur M. Levine, a property owner.



River Road Improvement Corporation.

Mayor Joseph Tedeschi is betting that, with a new look involving “better access, and more services, specialty retailers and restaurants,” River Road can become more viable.

Robert W. Landzettel, chairman of the improvement corporation, agreed. “The results will not pop up overnight, but this program provides the framework to move into the future,” said Mr. Landzettel, whose family has run Lazon Paints on River Road for 34 years.

Among the \$1.75 million in physical up-grades planned are the creation of two more parking lots and the improvement of three intersections along River Road, with work on the first intersection at Fair Lawn Avenue to start this spring.

Business owners are also being encouraged to spruce up their properties with the help of low-interest loans offered through four neighborhood banks. Each has committed to lend \$500,000 annually for the next three years in seven year loans of \$5,000 to \$50,000 at one point below the prime rate. The loans can be used to improve store facades and interiors.

The approval process has also been expedited and the borough is revising its zoning ordinance. Some revisions will raise building heights along the street to three stories from two and permit office and residential use above stores. And following the improvement corporation’s “streetscape master plan,” property owners are encouraged to put in new signage and more landscaping.

ONE example is the \$10 million expansion planned for the 25,000 square foot Shop Rite that anchors an 85,000 square foot shopping center on the corridor. The old supermarket will be razed and replaced by a 55,600 square foot store.

“We worked with the corporation on the streetscape plan and will implement it at our site,” said Todd Koenig of Saphire Associates in Princeton, the Shop Rite project’s architect. Among other things 35 trees will go up in front of the new store, to be clad in beige concrete block, and shepherd-crook street lights will line

the entrance. Mr. Koenig said construction would start by June and finish by year end.

“We have set a higher standard for the street,” said Mr. Smartt, the consultant, “and now we are

avenue’s appearance,” added Mr. Lopez, who is also Commissioner of Planning for the Town of Pleasantville where a similar strategy improved that community’s portion of Central Park



Part of Fair Lawn Avenue at River Road intersection is to be renovated.

giving property owners the incentives to follow it.”

Mayor Tedeschi said that if the program worked well on River Road, it might be tried on the borough’s Broadway corridor.

As part of a Clifton’s improvement program, the city has so far committed more than \$500,000 in Federal grants to renovating 6 of the 25 blocks that comprise its Main Avenue business corridor, one of several in the community.

The initial focus is on physical improvements, including new brick paved sidewalks, planters and street lights, said Stephen Lopez, who runs a planning and landscape architecture firm in Pleasantville in Westchester County and is a consultant to the city on the improvement program. The work is to be completed by this fall and will then continue along Main Avenue.

At the same time, proposals are before the City Council to add more parking, form a special improvement district and create an “overlay zone” that will set design standards for among other things building facades and signs. The latter is intended “to bring continuity to the

Avenue, a main commercial thoroughfare in Westchester County.

The property on the six blocks of Clifton’s Main Avenue, made up of 40 mostly retail businesses, is a mishmash, Mr. Lopez said. With low-interest loans from the city in cooperation with local banks, property owners will be encouraged to improve the appearance of their buildings using the new standards as well as add more landscaping. “The area needs an extra shot in the arm, and this program gives me some optimism for the future,” said Paul Epstein, whose family has operated Epstein’s at Clifton, a women’s clothing store on the avenue since 1945.

One encouraging sign is the transformation of a dormant auto dealership into a tire supply store. Although the tire store, while on Main Avenue, is outside the six-block target area, its transformation at a cost of more than \$1 million “is a plus to the avenue and an incentive” for property owners follow suit, said Donna M. Sidoti, the city’s program monitor for community development. “If we do nothing,” she added, “the avenue could decline beyond repair.”