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## Ratables Surge Along River Road

By Donald R. Smartt

**I**n the Bergen County Borough of Fair Lawn, new investment in the River Road commercial district has reached a high water mark, recording an astounding 36 percent increase in ratables within the district since 1996.

The investor, resident or visitor driving down River Road today will see evidence of the district's improvement on almost every corner. Gateway signs welcome visitors to Fair Lawn and River Road. Improved intersections allow smoother and safer traffic flow throughout the district. New sidewalks, trees and streetlights offer pedestrians safer passage while new benches, planters and litter receptacles provide shoppers a more welcoming atmosphere.

Recently completed developments include a newly constructed Walgreen's store and new Lackland Self-Storage facility. And Fair Lawn residents finally have a brand new \$12 million, 55,000 sq. ft. Shop Rite constructed on a site that stood vacant for years.

All this activity has translated into a tremendous windfall for the Borough. Property assessments in the district rose to more than \$68 million, up sharply from the 1996 total of \$50 million. At a time of low inflation, the value of increased investment in the district represents real growth for Fair Lawn.

### River Road's Low Point

Back in 1992, however, business along River Road—one of Bergen County's oldest commercial thoroughfares—had reached a low ebb. In the previous 25 years the district had seen no significant new investment in its commercial properties or in the improvement of its physical infrastructure.

River Road was a timeworn roadway used mainly for ferrying motorists through Fair Lawn. The commercial strip was uninviting to the suburban shopper, who had to first battle through poorly designed intersections and then scramble to find parking, an always scarce commodity. Retailers and other businesses were slowly seeping out of the Borough, increasing the municipality's reliance on residential tax revenues.



**Ratable Investment**—A 55,000 square-foot Shop-Rite bring tax ratables and business diversity to Fair Lawn while serving as a catalyst for future private investment.

“We felt we HAD to do something to turn around the district,” remembers Robert Landzettel, a former Fair Lawn Mayor, who owns Lazon Paints and currently chairs the River Road Improvement Corporation. “We were doing nothing to appeal to prospective new businesses and home buyers, and residents were beginning to view the district as an eyesore.”

River Road's reversal of fortunes began in late 1992, when the

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Fair Lawn Chamber of Commerce pulled together a group of River Road business owners, local bank executives and representatives from Bergen County government that formed the River Road Improvement Corporation (RRIC). Taking great care to solicit the feedback of

Fair Lawn residents, the RRIC undertook a lengthy visioning effort involving everyone with a shared interest in the district, and launched a \$30,000 process to develop a Master Plan. This comprehensive planning effort illuminated the challenges faced by the district, and these challenges became priority areas in the



RRIC's Work Plan. The RRIC charged itself with:

- Improving the physical appearance of River Road's public space and private properties;
- Calming traffic flow and improving pedestrian safety;
- Creating a better mix of retail and service businesses; and
- Developing more business and employee parking.

Today, seven years after the formation of the RRIC, the district has seen an unprecedented infusion of nearly \$25 million in public-and private-sector investment in improvements that are changing the face of the once-aging district.



**Concrete Evidence** – Lackland Storage's new facility is one of the cornerstones of the new investments and tax ratables along River Road.

### **Partnership at its Best**

River Road's success story is based on an axiom of partnership-building that commitment begets commitment. The business owners' willingness to invest their own time, treasure and talent to strengthen their community is what helped enroll the public sector in the effort.

"The River Road organization wasn't formed just to find out who they could ask for help—they were very clearly helping themselves," said Quentin Wiest, Executive Director of the Bergen County Improvement Authority. "Their initial and continuing commitment gave them long-term credibility."

To provide seed money for the group's initial efforts, each member of RRIC's board committed to a yearly contribution tied to the size of the organization they represented. Just as importantly, RRIC volunteers have all along been willing to invest the time needed to develop, build consensus for, and implement solutions that serve the long-term shared interests of the stakeholders.

In addition, the RRIC invested resources to engage a professional redevelopment consultant, a strategy that equipped the group with the technical expertise and administrative backing it needed to begin to transform vision into reality. These steps demonstrated a level of commitment that was noticed—and appreciated—at Borough Hall, and local government became willing to let the new business-led alliance manage the redevelopment effort.

"When we saw how these business owners were willing to roll up their sleeves and work—and to back up that effort with their own capital—we were convinced," said former Mayor Robert

Gordon. "We responded by partnering with the RRIC, creating a win-win situation for the people of Fair Lawn."

Besides getting the Borough's attention, the work ethic and enthusiasm of the RRIC volunteers created an 'esprit de corps' which allowed the group to attract and retain strong leaders, like Garret Nieuwenhuis, Senior Vice President of Valley National Bank, who served on the board for 7 years. "We were all rowing in the same direction, and that made it productive," said Nieuwenhuis. "There was a single agenda for everyone involved—regardless of status or political affiliation—and that agenda was to improve the economic vitality of the district."

With the necessity of broadening local control and management of the efforts to improve the corridor, River Road was designated a Special Improvement District (SID) in 1997, allowing businesses and property owners within the district to have a significant responsibility for the future of River Road. The SID—the third in Bergen County—offered a management and financing structure to oversee the planning and improvement of the district.

The RRIC was designated by the Borough as the 'district management corporation' to manage the district. District property owners—and their tenants where arrangements allow—pay an additional assessment—currently less than 6 percent of their annual property taxes—to operate the district's programs and oversee the improvement of the area.

With the SID in place and strong buy-in from the Borough and the community at large, the RRIC could quickly and aggressively meet their challenges head-on. Since forming the SID, the district has made strides in implementing new business-friendly zoning, hammering out cooperative parking solutions, devising and enforcing new aesthetic standards, and launching a sustained marketing program.

### **Investment Zones**

The Borough—at the request of the RRIC—in 1998 enacted new 'investment-friendly' zoning ordinances and incorporated the RRIC Master Plan for the Improvement of River Road into its own Master Plan. This move allows the Fair Lawn Planning Board to be guided by the RRIC's priorities when it considers new developments in the area. The zoning changes and Borough adaptation of the RRIC's master plan has made it possible for development incentives to become a matter of policy rather than individual exceptions granted by variances.

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The new land use zones within a portion of the SID—designated as B-4 and B-5 Zones—offer reduced parking, side and rear setback requirements and increases in bulk area coverage. Such changes allow for a higher return on the investment made by those developing commercial properties in the district.

Businesses in the B-1, B-2 and B-3 zoning districts are also offered reduced parking requirements, and can receive 'off-site'

parking credits by participating in a 'shared' parking plan being developed for the district in concert with the Planning Board and the Borough. In addition, the RRIC is currently working with owners in the Industrial I- 3 Zone to improve zoning in the area.

### **Parking Solutions**

Parking, perhaps the greatest challenge facing the district, is rigorously addressed in the new zoning. Shared parking plans, minimum parking requirements and allowable variances that may be considered for parking, are all a feature of the new zones.



**Public-Private Parking Solution – The new William Keller Municipal Parking Lot is a successful collaboration between the Bank of New York and the Borough of Fair Lawn, providing much needed parking for River Road patrons while serving the needs of the bank's customers.**

The first public parking lot for customers and employees in the district opened in 1998. Built at a cost of \$500,000 by the Borough on Fair Lawn Avenue, the new lot is a unique solution with an unusual private/public cooperative brokered by the RRIC. Combining a newly acquired private property with the existing Bank of New York parking lot, the Borough created the William Keller Municipal Parking Lot with access for both bank customers and River Road patrons.

The new lot lays the groundwork for other future parking initiatives. Consequently, the RRIC has engaged traffic and parking engineers to conduct an inventory of existing spaces along with parking use and utilization studies. With the completion of their work, additional sites will be recommended for new public parking in the district.

### **A Sharper Image**

The effort to enhance the appearance of River Road, a high priority, was greatly aided with the publication of a comprehensive Design Manual in June 1998. The manual offers guidelines for improving the physical appearance of a business or property. The guidelines mesh with the Borough's Master Plan, providing valuable, free advice on how to best improve individual properties or businesses within the district. Design specifications assist each stakeholder in making appropriate aesthetic decisions.

For capital improvements, the RRIC worked with the County and three local banks to make available \$3 million in reduced and zero-percent interest loans to district owners until the end of 1999 through a HUD program. For smaller-scale appearance upgrades, the RRIC offered district property owners dollar-for-

dollar matching grants of up to \$1,000. Funded by the RRIC's trustees, the matching grants were available until the end of 1999.

To tout River Road's new image, the RRIC has rolled out a comprehensive marketing program which includes a street banner program, co-op advertising through the Chamber's Focus publication, and a variety of in-store promotions.

### **Smoother Sailing**

Safer intersections at key points along River Road are another visible and important success of the RRIC. The County of Bergen invested \$534,000 to widen the intersections at River Road and Berdan Avenue, and at the Fair Lawn Avenue intersection the County is adding a continuous turning lane in two directions. Decreased congestion and a smoother traffic flow, particularly during rush hour, have made for easier traveling for vehicles and pedestrians alike.

To bring about streetscape improvements, federally funded grants of approximately \$780,000 were obtained in cooperation with the Borough, County's Board of Chosen Freeholders and the County Executive. Funding is in place and work nearly complete on the first segment of a two-phase effort that includes new concrete curbs and sidewalks with brick pavers, trees and other landscaping, new antique-style street lights, benches, trash receptacles and signage along both sides of a significant stretch of River Road.

Phase 2, which will see improvements continued on a conspicuous stretch of the road, and is now in the final stage of the grant approval process. Officials anticipate a favorable response to the \$400,000 request.

The RRIC's strategy of working closely with private developers throughout the district helps ensure that new streetscape amenities—lighting, landscaping, trees, benches and trash receptacles—are consistent with these elements already in place and planned elsewhere on River Road. This spirit of cross-sector cooperation seems to encourage developers to do their part. On the Shop-Rite and Walgreen's properties, for instance, the approximate cost of \$120,000 for complimentary streetscape elements was borne completely by the developers.

### **Bright Lights Bright Future**

For the first time this past December, the RRIC sponsored an extensive holiday lighting program that installed lighted wreaths on 80 new streetlights along River Road and Fair Lawn Avenue. Part of the long-term effort to promote the many fine businesses and services in the district, the decorations cast a celebratory glow on the many accomplishments of the RRIC, and led optimistic local officials to look forward to an even brighter future on River Road.

"The River Road Improvement Corporation makes the Borough's job much easier by working with us to develop relevant programs that boost ratables," said current Mayor David Ganz. "Fair Lawn is a more attractive place to live and work now because of the pro-business atmosphere and a property tax that is not burying homeowners."

### **About the Author:**

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