

TUESDAY, MARCH 5, 1996

## Freehold business district lures new owners to fill vacant shops

# Downtown attractions

By Jacqueline Sergeant - Freehold Bureau

**FREEHOLD** — Within the past few months, the downtown has lost three businesses, two of which stayed open less than six months. Main Street Bagels posted going out-of-business signs on Feb. 8. Blooming Rose shut its doors just before that.

Enzo Pizzeria closed down in December after about a year at Main and Throckmorton streets.

But officials of the Freehold Center Partnership—a non-profit organization that fosters the downtown economic development, historic preservation and revitalization—have not let the recent turnovers deter them.

“We have been working very hard to attract businesses in town,” said partnership Chairman Ron Reich, who said the partnership offers low-interest loans, tax abatements and technical design assistance to help lure potential business owners.

The partnership’s efforts in attracting new businesses downtown will become even more apparent in the next few months. Coming attractions include Stanley & Mishkin, a gourmet deli, set to open by March 18.

Cornerstone Caffe, a coffee and dessert bar, will open in mid-April. Rita’s Italian Ice will take the place of the former Enzo Pizzeria. It’s scheduled to open April 1. Center Players, a theater focusing on comedy

and stage productions, will open in May next door to Murry’s Office Supply.

In addition, Revco, a national drugstore chain, will move into the former A&P building on Throckmorton and Broad streets sometime this year, according to Alfred E. Sanders, partnership advocate.

Revco was bought in December by Rite-Aid Corp., the nation’s biggest drugstore chain. The Revco store is seen by partnership officials as a major boost to the area. The venture will be successful because of its proximity to senior citizens and parking, Reich said.

Sanders said that a national chain like Revco will boost the advertising of the

area. The store will no doubt pose competition for CVS, which moved to the location of the former Harris Pharmacy on West Main Street in January 1995.

Leonard Barbesh, owner of the Freehold Pharmacy, one of the few surviving family pharmacies in the area, knows what the arrival of national drugstore chains usually mean. He’s not worried.

“We have our own customers. We try to sell things that they don’t, Barbesh said, noting he now sells money orders and lottery tickets and accepts credit cards.

Sanders said there is also a lot of interest in the recently vacated spaces. The vacancy rate of downtown is not available because the partnership does not keep such a report, Sander said.

But he said there are minimal vacant storefronts downtown.

Sanders sees a proposed banquet room/catering service at the former Armed Forces recruiting station at 52 W. Main Street as another gateway into town.

The building is being purchased by Lorenzo Mongera, the owner of Lorenzo’s restaurant, located next door.

The new business owners, such as Robert and Stacy Stanley of Stanley & Mishkin, the former Colonial Bite Shop, said they settled on downtown Freehold after a lot of research.

“We felt the business community is proactive and we also like the downtown area,” he said. “The demographics of the area also offer the clientele that we wanted.”

While the partnership takes credit for attracting businesses, it takes no blame for what has happened to the short-lived businesses, Reich said.

He and others said the business owners simply did not give their ventures a chance to become established.

“As a businessman myself, I think it’s impossible to go into business and take off right away,” Reich said.

“You’ve got to be prepared. I think the challenge is to have capital behind the business,” said Joan M. Hepscher, executive director of the Western Monmouth Chamber of Commerce.

Hepscher also pointed out that the newer stores usually rely on walk-by traffic. “And winter is not the time for that,” she said.

But Steve, the owner of the bagel shop who did not want his last name used, said he kept losing money and just couldn’t continue.

“The business never took off. My dream turned into a nightmare all because I picked the wrong town,” said Steve, who accused the Partnership of neglecting some sectors of downtown—an accusation Reich denies.

But Reich said the partnership encompasses 17 square blocks and “we do the same work for the entire district. We don’t favor one area of town over another,” he said.



THOMAS P. COSTELLO, Staff Photographer

