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## Rahway's downtown smiles again

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Terry Jeter sighed as she remembered the Rahway where she grew up and shopped. She talked about the old McCrory's downtown on Cherry Street, and the places to buy shoes for children.

And then talked about the desolation. "At one point it all just stopped," she said. "One minute (stores) were here, the next, gone."

As Jeter recalled downtown Rahway's decline in the late 1970s and early '80s, her partner at Rebound Sports, Greg Foster, said he knew why—the mall. "People are so used to going out of Rahway and going to the malls," he said.

But, almost just as suddenly, happy days are returning to the downtown, which has reached a new building occupancy record of 95 percent, according to the Rahway Center Partnership.

Of the 165 usable storefronts, 151 are filled, said Don Smartt, downtown district manager.

Project manager Ed Murphy noted occupancy had been as low as 70 percent.

In November 1995, the partnership launched a three-prong strategy using a marketing consultant, advertising and a program to match property owners with merchants.

"The focus was to fill first-floor retail spaces," Smartt said. Chinese American investors who wanted to relocate from Hudson County and Staten Island were targeted, he added.

"In the market study, they found that the biggest group investing was the Mandarin-speaking population from Hong Kong and Formosa (Taiwan)," Smartt said.



Terry Jeter and Greg Foster who operate a store on Rahway's Main Street are happy about the revival of downtown businesses.

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The Community Advocates have assisted The Rahway Center Partnership in creating and implementing many successful development programs to enhance the downtown district.

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"It's a return to our past. Immigrants made this country and immigrants are making this country," he added.

But, some of the investors are people who grew up in the area. It didn't require any hard sell to encourage Jeter and Foster to invest in the downtown. They wanted to operate their athletic wear business in Rahway, and moved in on their own.

"If you're from Rahway and you like the town you will come," Jeter said of the business revival.

Not far from Routes 1&9, the downtown's tree-lined streets, with freshly painted black lampposts, welcome visitors to the historic city.

Merchants also are happy with the renovation of the train station. NJ Transit started the construction in January 1996, and the \$12.6 million project is expected to be completed by early fall, according to spokesman.

"It's really a focal-point of our revitalization," Mayor James Kennedy said of the rail station. "It helps us to market the downtown area."

Cilff Hardware Co. on Irving Street seemingly always has been in the downtown, according to Bruce Schwartz. His family has owned a retail and wholesale hardware store for nearly 50 years.

"The town is a good town," he said. "In the past 15 or 20 years we missed a step."

