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Fighting for mall crowds Officials look for ways to keep shoppers local

By Colleen Mancino

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RUTHERFORD—Like countless other towns across the country, this borough's once thriving downtown has declined to the point where officials are seeking outside advice.

There's been a host of troubles festering for years in the heart of Rutherford's downtown district. Some say the problems that shroud an otherwise stable business area include a lack of communication between merchants and officials, cleanliness and some unattractive storefronts.

At the suggestion of the Economic Development Committee, local officials hired Don Smartt, a vice president with The Community Advocates, Montclair, to help Rutherford address those problems.

In so doing, Rutherford joins the numerous communities across the state trying to rejuvenate in the face of ever-growing retail competition especially from malls.

For Rutherford, though, there's another concern. The chance that the William Carlos Williams Center for the Performing Arts and Fairleigh Dickinson University—both financially unstable could pull out in the next decade worries some, despite reassurances to the contrary.

The group, along with Smartt, is trying to motivate and inspire merchants and residents alike to turn their attention to the business district as a whole.

"Only a few people in Rutherford have a sense that their downtown is important to quality of life in town," said Smartt.

"Small town (merchants) don't have to worry about malls if they find their niche

in the community. You don't go to the mall to visit your favorite hardware store or get your suit cleaned," said Smartt.

"We're trying to encourage more people to become involved. We're asking people to ask themselves, how important is the downtown to our community, he said.

Longtime merchant and committee member Tom Clare said he's very concerned about the business district and mall competition.

"I see a need to pay attention to the downtown area. Adowntown like Rutherford can be a very vibrant shopping district, so long as it has good leadership and direction," said Clare, who owns Shop Rite Liquors.

Smartt, who has worked with communities throughout the state, has helped bring about many success stories in local business districts.

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Donald Smartt

Principal, The Community Advocates

Informal tours of some of those communities and discussions with officials from the towns prompted local officials to hire Smartt, for \$7,500, to work some magic in Rutherford.

Smartt is currently working with one other Bergen County community—Englewood.

Englewood mayor Donald Aronson said his town has benefited in many ways under Smartt's direction.

Improvements in Rutherford are on a much smaller scale and won't cost more than \$50,000, said Smartt.

The Downtown Committee has identified the following as areas that need to be addressed in the business district:

- The absence of communication between the local governing body, chamber of commerce and the business community.
- The lack of municipal parking signs and cohesiveness in the retail signage throughout the business district.
- The absence of ambient lighting throughout the business district along with poorly decorated windows, lack of trees and landscaping and unkept storefronts.
- The presence of litter in the front of stores and in the rear of commercial properties along with neglecting to enforce or ensure the minimum standards of commercial maintenance.

At a meeting set for July, Smartt will unveil a plan of action to address those concerns.

"The primary constituent in a downtown that's going to manage its transition is the resident," Smartt said. "Retailers who are residents are the real anchors and they're rare."

"I think they (residents) have to have an understanding that the vitality of the downtown is the key to the vitality of the residential areas. Some towns have that understanding. Unfortunately some towns will never have it," said Smartt.

