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Revitalizing Bloomfield Center

By Donald R. Smartt

According to James Hughes, dean of Rutgers University's Planning and Public Policy School, "Virtually all the elite communities are older communities that developed around a train station and a downtown," (quoted in a recent Star-Ledger article on rising New Jersey housing prices.) The configuration of the older towns, he added, "gives the image that there is a center of community."

The central business district in the historic town of Bloomfield possesses those 'elite' attributes, is conveniently located off the Garden State Parkway in the heart of Essex County, and is soon to be connected by direct-rail to Manhattan via New Jersey Transit's MidTown Direct service.

Yet despite these and other strategic assets, Bloomfield Center has experienced a period of decline since its heyday in the 1960's. Nowadays, since Bloomfield residents are more drawn to other town centers and suburban malls for shopping and other needs, Bloomfield's downtown is not working for its community the way elite town centers do. Today, however, after an intensive six-month planning effort—following three years of organization—and consensus building—Bloomfield Center has reason to hope for better times. A broad representative group called the Bloomfield Center Alliance has produced an aggressive Revitalization Plan with a full slate of recommendations designed to restore the downtown district's place as a center of commerce, culture and community for Bloomfield residents.

The First Try

As far back as 1989, town leaders decided something had to be done to at least slow the decline of the Center. And they tried. A business improvement district was created and funds allocated, but the effort fizzled quickly—the only time such a district has been rescinded in the state.

There are various opinions about why the effort failed: no grass-roots involvement, too much politics, mutual mistrust, and a lack of communication.

But such was the bad taste left that the idea was not revisited

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



The banner in the foreground signals the Bloomfield Center Alliance's early success in building a more positive image for Bloomfield's downtown, while in the background stands the Frank M. Leo Building, a property whose re-tenancing represents a key challenge for the public-private partnership's revitalization effort.

until late into the next decade. Then three local leaders – Tim Kane, senior member of Bloomfield's Township Council; Richard Bzdek, then-president of the town's Chamber of Commerce; and Ray McCarthy, chairman of the township-

appointed Bloomfield Business Advisory Board—enlisted the help of Downtown New Jersey, the statewide advocacy organization for commercial district revitalization, and set out to restart the effort to renew the Center.

That effort is now concluding a strategic planning process overseen by the Bloomfield Center Alliance, a true public-private partnership nearly four years in the making, built from the bottom up with buy-in from all key stakeholders and strong support from local government.



Starting Again—Slowly

Those early players knew they had to take a different route than the one taken years before. They would go slow, establish strong communication, bring in a variety of interests and ensure that those who would profit the most from the Center's revitalization be the same people who would drive it.

"Our main focus was that this be led by the business community," says Bzdek, vice president of Bloomfield-based American Savings Bank, an 80-year community institution. "We looked to the town to supplement our own funds, but essentially the business community led the way."

With all this in mind, the Bloomfield Center Steering Committee was formed in 1997; and with the help of an outside facilitator they began to organize and set priorities. The group's first efforts were focused on reversing the long-held negative public perception of the Center with a unified banner program, a sustained public relations effort and the rescue of a perennially beleaguered holiday decorating program.

While they may seem small-scale and cosmetic, these improvements came as a breath of fresh air for residents who hadn't seen or heard anything positive coming out of the Center in decades. And more importantly, they demonstrated the possibility of bringing people together and developing partnerships to improve the downtown.

A Partnership Emerges

Out of the Bloomfield Center Steering Committee came a work plan aimed at tackling actual problems, as well as confronting the perception that the problems were worse than they really are. The steering committee issued a report that outlined short-term, intermediate-term and long-term goals for several major areas including: parking; business recruitment; public relations, marketing and advertising; and building a strong advocacy organization.

Not just a merchants' organization but a coalition involving all those with an interest in the vitality of the Center, the Bloomfield Center Alliance was founded to address the challenges identified in the committee's report. Represented in the Alliance in addition to business owners are property owners like Big M, Inc. (which operates apparel outlets Mandees' and Annie Sez); the Watsessing Heights Neighborhood Association (WHNA), a residents' organization representing the neighborhood just to the south of the Center, and significant institutional players like New Jersey Transit and Bloomfield College, a private four-year college with an 11-acre campus adjacent to the downtown.

Critical to sustainability of the Alliance is the strength and breadth of cross-sector partnership that has developed cooperation between residents, merchants and downtown property owners and local institutions—with the backing of the Township at every step of the way. In fact, the Alliance's Area Study funding of \$75,000 was divided equally between three funders: the Township, New Jersey Transit and Bloomfield College.

As with all successful partnerships, Alliance members are motivated by mutual interest. "An attractive and dynamic downtown will have more appeal to potential students and faculty, just as a vibrant college can make for a strong downtown," said Bloomfield College president Jack Noonan, adding that "the

college and the community are inextricably entwined."

At New Jersey Transit, Mark W. Gordon, senior director of real estate, says, "The town is aware that MidTown Direct will have an impact on the community, and we are pleased to have a role in helping Bloomfield prepare for it. While the train will have a positive impact on the downtown, it will not revitalize the Center by itself."

Those who invested less financially but put in substantial time also saw the Alliance as necessary. Susan Connolly, WHNA's president, says, "We see ourselves as obvious stakeholders in the Center and believe we needed to be in there. We agreed to come to the table because we realized that was a way of showing our commitment."

The alliance set to work, meeting regularly and – as it moved toward the Revitalization Plan Study – posted some interim accomplishments like:

- Matching more than 2 to 1 with private funds every dollar contributed by the town;
- Undertaking a study of Bloomfield Center parking conditions;
- Recruiting businesses to 2 Broad, the 7-story building that sits at the center of downtown and had been largely empty for many years;
- Gaining more positive press coverage than Bloomfield had seen in years;
- Continuing the holiday lighting and banner programs; and
- Producing \$10,000 in television and newspaper advertisements promoting the Center.

The Alliance also made some moves to help ensure ultimate success. One was to stretch the traditional boundaries of the Center to embrace large "anchor" businesses that lie just the opposite side of the Garden State Parkway, traditionally the outer limit of the Center. That includes two large car dealerships and the recently opened Home Depot.

The multi-disciplinary project team that conducted the Revitalization Plan Study—with consultants from the Atlantic Group, Brown and Keener Urban Design, Maser Consulting and Square Foot, Inc.—brought the Township Council in May a set of recommendations containing a multi-phased plan leaving Bloomfield with some clear directions for the Center's revitalization.

The Second Coming of S.I.D.

Working closely with the Alliance and representatives of New Jersey Transit and Bloomfield College, the Study team concluded that the creation of a well-managed Special Improvement District will be an essential tool in the implementation of Bloomfield Center's revitalization plan. The SID could work with the township and planners to implement design guidelines and improvement programs to upgrade the appearance of the district. The SID could also help with parking management, brokering cooperative parking solutions and developing and selling a plan to find parking for downtown employees that frees up the prime spots in front of the stores.

Perhaps most importantly, the SID would implement an aggressive business recruitment and marketing program. The proposed SID could also help with business development and retention, working with the Township to streamline regulatory processes to improve the overall climate for business operations.

Redevelopment: Bold but Necessary Steps

The Study team also pointed out that the town's ownership of the defunct Royal Theater, a key Bloomfield Avenue property acquired in 1998, will enable it to lead the way in redeveloping the core of the Center. They determined that the theater should be demolished to make way for a large parking deck with at least 14,000 square feet of retail space on the ground floor.

The new structure would serve three purposes: attracting new retailers with large modern spaces with Bloomfield Avenue frontage; creating parking for the Frank M. Leo Building at 2 Broad Street, a beautiful 7-story flat-iron office building that is at this point virtually un-tenantable for want of a viable parking source and some much-needed physical improvements; and creating parking for the commuters expected to begin using Midtown Direct in its second and third years of service.

A strategy for attracting a developer for the Royal Theater parking deck/retail project would be to offer that site's developer the rights to also develop the nearby Farrand Street parking lot once new construction on the theater site has been completed. The Farrand Street lot—a large municipally-owned property adjacent to the train station slated to serve as interim parking for Midtown Direct commuters—would be available in a second phase for commercial or residential development with on-premise parking capacity.

In the area extending from 2 Broad Street to Liberty Street, a redevelopment area would be drawn to spur private-sector investment – to be attracted by tax abatements, low-interest development loans and other programs. Paired with the development of new parking, these incentives could get the once-bustling Leo Building back in play as a driving force of the Center's economy.

In general, financing of this redevelopment program would be multi-sourced—investment from the township, from a developer, and from the owner of the Leo Building—and would depend on the Township taking a strong leadership role with the Alliance continuing its vigorous advocacy.

Upgrading a 19th Century Traffic Pattern

Motorists driving through the Center are familiar with the frustrating series of “no left turn” or “no turn” signs: this is the strongest association of Bloomfield for many transient visitors, and a result of a radial street pattern configured in the mid-1800's for the horse-and-carriage ‘rush’ hour.

The consultants devised a Loop Road concept with way-finding signage and reconfigured intersections to enable drivers to move in and about the center easily, and promote easier access to existing parking facilities. To accommodate people walking from their cars, the creation of well-lit and landscaped walkways and an overall upgrade of the streetscape amenities throughout the district were recommended to make getting around town easier and more pleasant.

An Unorthodox Anchor

Traditionally, Bloomfield Center has been defined as the cluster of streets around 2 Broad. But in looking at the way the community perceives the Center and who the real stakeholders are in the district, it is important to extend the Center's border to the other side of the Garden State Parkway to include two large car

dealers and the new Home Depot.

Because many people from other towns already shop at Home Depot or buy cars at the Bloomfield Avenue dealerships, but are not really aware of being in the Center, it would be highly productive to unify the entire area with coordinated marketing, signage and banners.

Part of the challenge will be to improve the area near the Garden State Parkway off-ramp — dubbed by the consultants “the most depressing exit in the state” — whose prominent feature is currently a ‘no left turn’ sign against a vast background of dirty cement. The Alliance wants to capture the attention of drivers as soon as they leave the Garden State Parkway, let them know they have arrived in Bloomfield Center, and point the way to the college, the train station and the major stores in either direction.

If this recasting of downtown Bloomfield's traditional identity—the unification of Bloomfield Center and Bloomfield Center East—is successful, it may be the first time that a Home Depot and a cluster of auto dealerships serves as a downtown anchor.

Next Steps—Will the Township Lead the Way?

“Every 2 or 3 hundred years a town needs to upgrade its infrastructure...whether it needs it or not,” quipped Peter Silver, an Alliance board member and commercial property owner who has pitched similarly ambitious redevelopment ventures to town councils in other communities. “But seriously, it's been so long since the Center has been upgraded that we really have to invest.”

In a way, much of the hard work has been done—but there is much more to do. It has already been proven that all sectors can come together with a common goal—but that consensus must continue.

Already Bloomfield College has committed to a spot on the SID board. The township will have to take the lead on redevelopment and the business community will have to do the tough work of tending to its own image and to building consensus. The challenge will be for all involved to commit to a long process—at least five to ten years if successes like those in South Orange and New Brunswick are any indicators—and keeping the focus on the larger picture.

Looking ahead to the late-2001 arrival of MidTown Direct service, Jeffrey A. Warsh, executive director of New Jersey Transit, says, “It will be possible to go from Bloomfield to New York Penn Station in less time than it takes to get there from parts of upper Manhattan; this new service will improve the quality of life for Bloomfield's residents.”

Certainly, taking advantage of the arrival of this new amenity is essential if the Bloomfield Center revitalization effort is to succeed. And success hinges on building a downtown that serves the needs of the residents, attracts new investment, and ultimately helps the Township of Bloomfield rejoin the ranks of New Jersey's “elite” communities.

About the Author:

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