



The revitalization of Flatbush Junction: Time for a plan

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With his sleeves rolled up on a recent hot summer day, the Flatbush Junction Business Improvement District (BID) executive director Kenneth Mbonu walked us briskly along the Flatbush Ave. corridor. Along the way, he took notice of things that needed to be done on the street. He proudly walked us into a brand new 20,000 s/f Nike Town store where he greeted the manager with a great big smile. Kenneth was quick to note that this latest shop comes on the heels of another announced mixed-use development project, headed by Joyland Group and Meral Property Group, that will open next to the existing Target location. This will bring an additional 60,000 s/f of retail space to the area, plus another 40,000 s/f of office space and parking.

Things are looking up for the "Junction," one of Brooklyn's key commercial areas outside of downtown. In 2009, the commercial corridor received a big boost with the completion of a 600,000 s/f shopping center anchored by the 225,000 s/f Target - one of the retailer's largest stores in the country.

This new retail magnet has been a greater draw for the neighborhood, spurring the addition of other retailers along the corridor. Whereas before 2009 the retail landscape at the Junction was predominantly discount stores and fast food chains, there has been an explosion of national credit tenants since the triangle was completed - Target, David's Bridal, Starbucks, Men's Wearhouse, Payless Shoe Source, and HomeGoods, to name a few. Following the Junction's lead, Flatbush Plaza has TD Bank, 7-Eleven, and Retro Fitness as tenants, and Modell's and The Vitamin Shoppe also recently joined the Junction retail scene at locations across the street.

As of our tour with Kenneth, the commercial vacancy rate hovers around just 5%. Such retail density is the result of 1.2 million residents living within a three mile radius of the Junction, a population comparable to that of Dallas, Texas.

The commercial corridor also benefits from being one of the city's most diverse neighborhoods, and its BID has done an excellent job adding an extra shine to the corridor with newly planted trees, an effective graffiti removal program, and a daily clean team that is paying attention to the details.

The strong presence of Brooklyn College is also a tremendous asset with more than 18,000 students, faculty, and staff on its beautiful 26-acre campus. Under the leadership of Dr. Karen Gould, Brooklyn College has opened a new School of Cinema located at Steiner Studios in the Brooklyn Navy Yard and is also bolstering the main campus with a number of new developments. The Performing Arts Center is being expanded with a 64,000 s/f addition, including state-of-the-art recording studios and extra performance space. Now there are plans for a new mixed use development that will be home for the School of Business, add residential dormitories, and strengthen the retail corridor with new shops.

Kenneth and the board of the Junction BID have also been terrific in bringing the key government, community, and private sector stakeholders around the table to discuss important community

issues.

Going forward, the Flatbush Junction BID will need to play an even more important role in bringing together all the community's stakeholders to best leverage the new development taking place and to ensure that Brooklyn College's plans come to fruition. A new Business School and newly constructed dormitories will not only benefit students but also be an asset to the community with new services to grow and build local businesses.

Such large scale, creative change will not happen by chance. It will take a lot of hard work, a clear vision, and an outline of implementation actions to best knit together all of these developments. Too often, we have seen community development organizations commissioning more retail studies that result in further paralysis instead of charting a clear course for the future.

Now is the time for the Flatbush Junction BID to lead the way in bringing together Brooklyn College and other major stakeholders to create a workable strategic plan that will leverage the strengths of the neighborhoods, developments underway, and the exciting, new initiatives being planned in the coming years.

The Junction should look no further than Brooklyn's Myrtle Ave., where Pratt Institute, under the leadership of Dr. Thomas Schutte, brought the community together to drive positive change.

It all begins with a good, solid plan.

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