



Restoring Hempstead to its glory days: A look at the area's retail market from the 1940s through today

July 27, 2009 - Spotlights

The Original Hempstead

Looking back in time, not too long ago, the Village of Hempstead-New York's largest village-was the center of Nassau County. It was literally "the place to be." However, throughout recent decades, Hempstead Village and its prestige declined. The village digressed from a prosperous metropolis to a town which struggles to live up to the expectations of many of the successful townships on Long Island. Hempstead became a retreat for new coming immigrants and had a greater appeal towards the African American population.

From a bustling commercial hub to vacant lots and empty buildings, Hempstead has seen many ups and downs. Hempstead was once Nassau's major retail center during the 1940s through the 1960s. It was known to be one of the biggest and well known market places on Long Island. Chain department stores such as Arnold Constable and Abraham & Straus were a huge part of Hempstead for many years. These stores weren't just your typical retail or department stores. Hempstead's Abraham & Straus was the largest grossing suburban department store in the entire country during the late 1960s. "For Long Island, it was the focal point, the big city," according to Desmond Ryan, director of the Association for a Better Long Island, a developers' group.

Downfall of Hempstead

Hempstead fell on hard times. The arrival of regional shopping malls such as Roosevelt Field and Green Acres, the closure of nearby Mitchel Air Force Base in 1961 as well as changing demographics sent retail trade in the village into a downward spiral that it was unable to recover from. In addition to that, the recessions of the 1970s and 1980s only made things worse. Hempstead fell on hard times as suburbs like Levittown and shopping malls sprang up, sucking people out of Hempstead and into the newer places. The whole mentality of shopping changed. As the more affluent residents fled to the newer suburbs, African Americans and Hispanics moved in. At the same time poverty grew and taxes rose. There was also an increase in crime and a decline in school performance. The village fell on hard times, suffering problems common to the inner cities-loss of jobs, a rise in crime, drugs, gangs, illegal housing and failing schools. Further looking into the housing situation, renters outpaced homeowners. Of the 16,000 housing units in the village, more than 50% were rentals.

The large storefronts of downtown Hempstead transitioned into abandoned parking lots, churches, bodegas and shops selling pornography. Main Street consisted of boarded-up buildings and empty lots overgrown with grass. These images confirmed that Hempstead has indeed slumped into a depressed village. Even the mayor of Hempstead, mayor Wayne Hall Sr. admitted that, "It needed to be fixed up."

Uprising in the New Millenium

Fortunately, with hardship comes prosperity. Mayor Hall has plans to redevelop underused parking lots and attract more than 500,000 s/f of restaurants, stores and other businesses on Main Street. Recent years have seen the redevelopment of the village as a business center as well as a government center. Retailers once again are showing interest in the village and seeing the light it once shone decades ago. Over the past 300 years, Hempstead has developed into one of the largest incorporated villages in the state of New York, with a population in excess of 50,000 people. Recently two large tracts of retail property have undergone redevelopment. The former Abraham & Straus department store which once sat on 17 acres of land has been demolished and replaced with national anchor retailers including Home Depot, Stop & Shop and Old Navy centered in the well known "Hub Shopping Center."

The other large tract of retail property that underwent major re-development was the former Time Square Stores. It is now known as Hempstead Village Commons and consists of many known stores including Pep Boys, Staples, Rite Aid and Hollywood Videos. The shopping center includes 465 parking spots and sits on 100,000 s/f.

"For more than 10 years, the former Times Square Store sat in Hempstead as a vacant, deteriorating and daily reminder of the Village of Hempstead's past," former governor Pataki said. "With this project, Hempstead Village Commons will become a symbol of Hempstead's economic rebirth and a catalyst for future economic development."

Hempstead's future is shining brightly now as it did many years ago. A lost village that was once prosperous will once again be reborn and bring about a new ray of hope to both consumers and retailers as well as for its residents.

Ron Koenigsberg is the president of American Investment Properties, Garden City, N.Y.

New York Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540