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Hackensack Moves to Lift Main Street

By **MELANIE LEFKOWITZ**

Rayon Richards for The Wall Street Journal

Main Street in Hackensack, above, has seen a long decline in business, a trend the city hopes to reverse.

After decades of store vacancies and dwindling foot traffic along its struggling Main Street, Hackensack, the seat of affluent Bergen County, is taking steps toward an overhaul.

In June, the Hackensack City Council voted to designate the Main Street area in need of rehabilitation, which the city hopes will help it qualify for state

aid to improve infrastructure. The next step, city and business leaders say, is to update the area's zoning to ease restrictions on development. Ultimately, they hope, the changes will draw developers, new residents and national retailers.

"We really just needed a plan to figure out how to connect these dots and make our downtown work," says Jerome Lombardo, chairman of the Upper Main Alliance, the merchants group working with the city on the redevelopment plans. "We'll try to have a downtown where you can live here, eat here, play here, work here, do everything here—but this is a complicated plan with a lot of moving parts."

Hackensack is a demographically diverse city of about 43,000 residents, located about 14 miles from Manhattan. Its central location and varied stock of co-ops, condominiums and single-family homes attract those who commute into the city, central New Jersey or even Rockland County, says Rachel Glick, of Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage.



Rayon Richards for The Wall Street Journal

A Sears store at the northern end of Main Street.

"There's a really nice diversity in the style of homes," Ms. Glick says. "Basically any kind of living you want, Hackensack has."

Residential real estate within the city is among the least expensive in Bergen County. The median listing price was \$269,000 in June, down from \$275,000 in June 2010, according to Zillow.com, compared with the county's median list price of \$450,000 this June.



Rayon Richards for The Wall Street Journal

Street banner for Hackensack's Upper Main Alliance.

The city says its population more than triples during each weekday, including those who work or do business in Hackensack. Yet Main Street, once a vibrant commercial center, began to decline in the 1960s and 1970s as shoppers migrated to box stores and malls.

"That's a trend that has continued very

slowly but steadily for the past 30-35 years. So what we have now is a Main Street that is certainly not everyone's prime destination," says Steve Lolacono, Hackensack's city manager. "We need some major, major help in getting rehabilitation in here and getting some of the properties renewed and redeveloped."

Mr. Lolacono says the city aims to overhaul the zoning—particularly rules concerning building height and parking requirements—by early next year, and expects to begin soliciting proposals from developers within the next 18 months. The timing of the redevelopment plans depends in part on whether the economy improves, he says.

"What's happening in the economy is certainly going to be a big driver of whether or not a developer wants to come in and put in a 10-story building," he says.

Main Street has a Sears department store at its northern end, though most of the other shops and businesses along the thoroughfare are relatively small. Rinconcito Musical at 342 Main, sells music and books, among other items, and there are several jewelry, clothing and furniture stores, including the Adora furniture store at No. 205.

"There's really not a lot going on down here," says Ben Rivero, who opened his Casual Habana Cafe at 125 Main St. more than four years ago. "I don't think we have that draw, we don't have that one thing that draws people en masse."

His lunch customers, he says, come from nearby, while patrons at dinnertime travel from surrounding areas. "More people down here would definitely improve business," he says.

A study commissioned by the Upper Main Alliance found last year that several features make Hackensack a potential destination for shoppers and diners, including its central location and availability of public transit. The courts and county offices and the Hackensack University Medical Center already draw many people into the city, and officials hope to attract more of them to stay for a meal or to do some shopping before leaving.

The consulting firm Street-Works LLC of White Plains suggested the city divide about a dozen blocks of Main Street into three distinct neighborhoods, all with a mix of commercial and residential uses. The area at the north end, near Sears, would be more residential; the middle area would focus on shared public uses; and the south end, near the Bergen County Justice Center, would house a concentration of professional offices.



Currently most of the buildings on Main Street are one or two stories; the city envisions taller buildings that would include residences above the stores.

"You really need the residential to support the commercial," Mr. Lombardo says.

"Hackensack right now is mostly one story, and because of that we don't have anyone living right in our downtown."

David Figueras, manager of Kates Bros. Shoes, which has been on Hackensack's Main Street for 70 years and at its current location at No. 329 for about 25, says he had hoped improvements to the strip would come faster.

"We hang in there, we keep a low inventory. Some days are good and some are a little slower," he says. "There are still a lot of stores empty, but we keep our faith that things will start to improve."

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