

Waterfront development gets mixed reviews

By Masha Rumer

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Mike Markel has owned Levine's Army & Navy Store at 17 North Main St. in Port Chester for 34 years. This haven of crew socks, shirts, jeans and camouflage clothing is named after his mother and has been in the family for 83 years.

But since the quiet Village of Port Chester has welcomed chain retailers, the extensive construction slowed down business, impacting smaller businesses by increased traffic and rents and pushing some tenants out of their work and homes.

"Thank God it ended, the roads are open and the traffic is flowing," Markel says. "I see new business coming, people are going to the movies and various places, and wander here and buy things. Anything that brings people downtown has to be good," he says about his new neighbors: the 140,000-square-foot Costco, the 70,000-square-foot Super Stop & Shop, Bed Bath & Beyond, DSW, Loews Cineplex, Marshalls and Michaels Arts & Crafts, with an indoor three-level parking structure.

The new cream-colored concrete buildings are becoming visual and economic centerpieces of the Village of Port Chester, but the locals have mixed feelings about the \$100 million, 27-acre development, constructed by G&S Investors of Old Bethpage, N.Y.

Many store and restaurant owners, especially of small Latino and other immigrant restaurants, bodegas and Laundromats, are afraid the development might put them out of business.

Business has picked up a little for El Plebeyo Peruvian Restaurant at 25 North Main St., says Manager Richard Davila, whose sister owns the eatery. But he fears the coming of the large new restaurants later this year on the corner of South Main Street and Westchester Avenue, like the Waterfront Grille, an Asian fusion restaurant, and Buffalo Wild Wings Grill and Bar will draw customers away.

Tuan Vo, who works at Kevin's nail salon at 33 ½ North Main St., complains about bumper to bumper traffic. Ninety percent of his customers drive.

"When we first opened six years ago, we were always very busy, but I don't get more customers because the road is busy. They keep driving around, they can't find parking."



And things have been rough for antique businesses in Port Chester, a former antiques destination.

"I'm the only one left, nobody else made it," says Gretchen Devlin, owner of Gretchen's Loft. She says that during the three years of construction have cost her some customers because of the blocked off roads, diverted traffic and tape around her store. "I put blood, sweat, and tears into creating this business. I would like to stay here."

She is also concerned about the visual impact of the new structures by the Byram River.

"The waterfront should be a place where people retreat to—strolling the boardwalk, little cafés to stop and get a pastry. But instead they have a tire center and Costco," Devlin says.

The newcomers

In addition to the existing new stores, Petco, Famous Footwear, and Walgreen's are on the way this fall, plus three additional buildings, containing a waterfront restaurant, a dry cleaners and a yet unleased building, said Doug Riley, a principal with developer G&S Investors.

Meanwhile, a total of about 300 residents and entities were displaced by the construction meant to revitalize the downtown area and provide employment opportunities.

Costco and Super Stop & Shop are popular with many locals and out-of-towners, making Port Chester a shopping draw.

"It's very convenient, everything is here," said village resident Maureen Brown, a teacher at North Baptist Nursery School, doing some evening shopping with her daughter Heather and granddaughter, visiting from Providence, R.I. Brown previously shopped at the store's Glenville location.

“They took a lot of character away from Port Chester,” added her daughter Heather who grew up in the village. “It’s ugly, it’s horrible architecture.”

Tony Rosales, a freshman at Port Chester High School, wandered into Michaels Arts & Crafts Store on the top floor of the development on his way home after school to get a pack of gum.

“This is good because you know you can come here whenever you want,” he says.

More space—more customers?

But although some residents are drawn by the new shopping options, skepticism remains about the development’s aesthetics and sales. The parking lots on a weekday afternoon are nearly empty. Michaels, DSW, and Bed Bath & Beyond are brimming with gadgets and relaxing music overhead, offering the American dream of choice in a spacious, pressure-free environment—but only handfuls of customers are browsing the aisles.

Liz Kahle of Rye has been going to Marshalls since the store opened. “There’s not a whole lot in Rye—sort of a cheaper alternative to Rye,” she says, checking out the shoes.

Loews theaters, with its state-of-the-art facilities, is reportedly not performing up to its expectations.

Peter Iasillo, president of the Port Chester/Rye Brook Chamber of Commerce, said he received a phone call from Loews a few weeks ago.

“They were concerned that they’re looking to have a larger attendance at their theater and at the time it wasn’t happening,” Iasillo, who offered to help the theater, said.

He also complained that some of the new businesses have not joined the chamber, disconnecting from the community.

“There wasn’t enough advertising, enough publicity,” he said about the Waterfront project. “You gotta have gimmicks now, you gotta present people with something that shows them how it’s better to shop at our store and not another store. People don’t care about the square footage, you gotta give them a little pizzazz. Evidently someone up in the New York office doesn’t think it’s necessary.”

Although the general admission tickets have gone down 50 cents on weekends to \$10, the rates went up by more than \$1.00 for children, senior citizens, and matinees.

Marshalls, Panera Bread and Super Stop & Shop are already drawing their share of customers, as is Costco, the first store in the waterfront development.

“The business is doing well, even though we don’t do the plan,” said Marshalls Assistant Store Manager Manuel Olivera about the store, one of more than 700 in the chain, which opened on May 5, 2005. The store is grossing about \$135,000 per week, about \$10,000 below the district’s \$145,000 weekly average.

But Olivera is not worried. “We expect the sales going up. We’re still building the customers, still trying to get the feel for what kind of merchandise is in most demand.” It’s taken time to figure out that suits don’t sell much here, while shoes, home items, and bedding are popular.

Business is also picking up at Panera Bread, a bakery-café chain selling soups, sandwiches, breads, and pastries.

“So far, so good, we’re pleasantly surprised,” said Tony Diaz, operating partner.

They try to connect to the community by donating leftovers to local organizations, like the Don Bosco Center, soup kitchens, churches and school events. The majority of Panera’s 38 employees are from Port Chester.

Developer G&S’s Doug Riley declined to comment on how specific retailers are performing.

“I think it’s terrific,” he said about the whole project. “It’s doing a great job of drawing people who otherwise wouldn’t be coming into Port Chester.”

Other effects

The smaller Latino businesses, which account for the majority of businesses downtown, feel out of touch with the development, said Blanca Lopez, director of the Neighborhood Preservation Company for Human Development Services of Westchester.

“Now that the paper has been signed and sealed, G&S can really do whatever they please, not taking into consideration how small business owners feel about this,” she said.

“Unfortunately, as an administration in the village we can’t control the rents,” Port Chester Mayor Gerald Logan said. “But it’s ludicrous what these landlords do to tenants. I don’t know if there’s much more room in the village for affordable housing. It’s become a very expensive village to live in.”