



Staten Island Advance

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Shoppers in store for a Staten Island retail revolution

by TRACEY PORPORA

Staten Island shoppers who have headed to New Jersey for everything from apparel to furniture, drawn by the Garden State's cheaper sales tax, say they are fed up with rising tolls and traffic-clogged roads.

That's why it appears more are choosing to spend their money in their hometown.

With that tide shifting and major residential developments on the near horizon, developers are aggressively enhancing the borough's retail landscape.

The players are national and international firms with solid track records for creating retail meccas.

Five of the most prominent projects in the pipeline are BFC Partners' Empire Outlets in St. George; Blumenfeld Development Group's Bricktown Centre, Charleston; General Growth Properties' Staten Island Mall expansion in New Springville, Kimco Realty's The Boulevard in New Dorp, and Melohn Properties' Riverside Galleria in Charleston.

Also being developed with a significant retail component is the site of the LNG Tanks in Rossville.

From price-slicing outlets like TJ Maxx in Bricktown Centre to higher-end department stores, such as Nordstrom Rack anchoring the Empire Outlets, top retailers have placed Staten Island firmly in the center of their planning radar.

And with at least 200 new stores at all the centers combined, Staten Island is on the verge of a retail revolution.

If they build, will shoppers come?

However, some wonder if the borough has the customer base to support six new retail centers, especially with the continuing surge in online shopping.

But retailers who are planning to locate here have done their homework: Staten Island — the most suburban borough in the city — is appealing due to higher income levels than the other boroughs, and the rising tolls that are driving more folks to shop closer to home.

"I don't go to Jersey that much anymore. I love the idea that they are giving us more stores," said Marguerite Kazak, a New Dorp resident. "If I don't have to go off the Island, I won't go off the Island. I'd rather pay a dollar more here and not have to pay the toll."

Said Woodrow resident Lou Corradi, "I used to do most of my shopping in New Jersey. But with the bridge and the higher tolls, it's no longer worth it," he said.

And developers have taken notice of this trend.

"If people are driving over a bridge to go shopping, a lot of developers would say, 'We can locate something closer and draw them in that way,'" said Jesse Tron, a spokesman for the International Council of Shopping Centers, a Manhattan-based trade association for the shopping center industry.

The domino effect

After BFC Partners announced its plan to build New York City's first outlet mall, suddenly there were more developers seeking to expand or build malls across the borough.

"Typically, with real estate, there is a domino effect where once a location is discovered and attracts an initial flurry of investment, obvious attention is garnered," said Abraham Unger, Wagner College's director of urban programs and assistant professor in the Government and Politics Department.

"Investors have been waiting for decades for the North Shore Development, so why not have it spill out to the East, West and South shores of the Island. ... The Empire Outlets created a more competitive environment," he added.

Island identity

And there are other reasons experts cite: After more than four decades of housing development and population growth, the retail industry is finally catching up.

"Staten Island is the one place that is like the rest of America in New York City. It's the suburban borough," said Unger.

"If Staten Island becomes a shopping and retail outlet hub that the rest of the boroughs can go to, as well as Staten Islanders, that seems to fit with the identity of the borough," he added.

Economy on the rebound

As Staten Island, like the rest of the country, slowly recovers from what economists and others have dubbed "the great recession," it becomes more attractive to national retailers who are looking to locate in profitable markets.

"Staten Island has been recognized as a solid middle class borough. It has the highest average income of all the five boroughs. It makes sense in a recession-driven economy to have solid retail on Staten Island because you have a population who can still buy stuff on a regular basis," said Unger.

With the new shopping centers also comes a multitude of retail jobs.

"Staten Island is critically short of jobs. There's about 212,000 people who wake up every day and want to go to work and there's only about 110,000 jobs right now," said Jonathan Peters, professor of finance and economics in the College of Staten Island's School of Business.

"While retail jobs may have lower pay, on the other hand, a job is better than no job," added Peters.

Shopping close to home

With new stores planned for each of the Island's four shores, residents say they will shop at the retail strip closest to their homes to avoid the ever increasing traffic backups across the borough.

"I probably won't go to the outlets (in St. George) — it's too far away," said Celia Rossi, a Tottenville resident. "I plan to stick around here (Bricktown Centre) and the (Staten Island) Mall."

Said Ed Seelman of Tottenville: "I would not go down by the ferry to shop. I go down to Hylan Boulevard to shop or I go to (Bricktown Centre in Charleston)."