

Merchants, experts favor mix of stores for downtown

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Asbury Park has three distinct business districts -- Main Street, Asbury Avenue and Cookman Avenue -- and officials hope to revive the defunct commercial corridors of Springwood Avenue and the boardwalk. All are part of the Urban Enterprise Zone, a designation that means tax breaks for entrepreneurs and shoppers alike.

On Main Street, beauty shops and coin-operated laundries sit next to fast-food joints, bail bondsmen, nail salons and hip-hop clothing stores. Branching off Main, Asbury Avenue hosts some light industrial uses, a restaurant and a coffee shop. Stores are generally open every day during normal business hours.

On Cookman Avenue, several high-end home furnishings stores are interspersed between art galleries, while an espresso and gelato shop sits across the street from an organic juice bar. So far, many of the stores are open limited hours, some on weekends only.

Jean Brutus, owner of a hair salon on Main Street about half a mile from Cookman Avenue, echoed the concerns of many longtime residents when he said he likes what is happening downtown but can't afford to shop there.

"It's for people who have money to spend," Brutus said. "I wish they (would) come down here and get a haircut."

Asbury Park's downtown could do with "more variety" in its shops, agreed Judy Lubitz, owner of the stalwart Cooper Creation jewelry store on Cookman Avenue.

She noted the number of stores offering expensive antiques and furniture -- pricey items usually beyond the reach of the typical resident in a city that had a median household income of \$23,081 in 2000, second lowest in the state.

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"I don't think they can make this an antique mecca," Lubitz said. "How many persons without a lot of money need an antique in their house?"

Urban planning expert Roberta Brandes Gratz, author of "Cities Back from the Edge: New Life for Downtown," said downtowns need a variety of shopping options. "Otherwise, you just become an enclave.

"It won't be much of a real city if it is all high-end retail and high-end residential," Gratz said. "(An) urban place has to have a diversity of people, a diversity of business."

But she cautioned against having too many chain stores because money spent at those stores won't stay in the city.

Merchants, experts favor mix of stores for downtown (cont.)

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An October 2004 study conducted by the group Civic Economics in the Chicago neighborhood of Andersonville found that for every \$100 in consumer spending with a local firm, \$73 remained in the Chicago economy. By contrast, for every \$100 spent at a chain firm, \$43 remained in the Chicago economy.

In Asbury Park, downtown merchants have tried a variety of events and marketing efforts to attract shoppers. "First Night Asbury Park," held Dec. 4 and planned again for Feb. 5, saw stores stay open late and offer customers wine and cheese in a festive atmosphere.

Former Councilwoman Kate Mellina, who ran a Cookman Avenue gallery from 1996 to 2000, was pleasantly surprised by the number of people who turned out for the event.

"I couldn't believe it was the same place where my gallery had been," Mellina said. "It's a totally different world down there."