

On the upswing

New businesses, better code enforcement seen as spurring downtown

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Jim Hayes, owner of Bistro Soleil, which opened recently at 173 Mercer St. in Hightstown.

HIGHTSTOWN — The arrival of a few new businesses and a heightened emphasis on code enforcement has at least two borough councilmen enthused about the downtown's revitalization.

Ryan Rosenberg, also a member of the Downtown Hightstown Committee, said efforts to maintain high standards of property maintenance and a focus on becoming more business friendly could lead to the borough's goal of "creating the atmosphere of a quaint, inviting and tasteful village in the downtown business district."

Mr. Rosenberg said he and fellow Councilman Jeff Bond, Zoning Official Bill Schmeling, Fire Official Tim Murray and Construction Official George Chin have worked over the past year to educate merchants of the borough's guidelines and their purposes.

"Due to this increased enforcement, the appearance of the downtown has slowly been improving," he said.

Mr. Bond, who owns a newly rehabilitated office and retail building on Mercer Street, said the revitalization effort is going "great."

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"There were some (personnel) changes taking place in the building and zoning departments and it took a little while to catch up," he added. "Now that everyone is on the same page, and the merchants are cooperating, things seem to be moving along."

According to Mr. Rosenberg, abiding by the guidelines can only help local businesses.

"When a place is well-maintained and attractive, it tends to be more inviting and leads to increased foot traffic and patronage," he added.

The group has been targeting certain points of maintenance and signage ordinances that play "a large part in tidying up the downtown," Mr. Rosenberg said.

Moving signs (those that flash or blink), temporary signs including banners, and signs in the public right of way are among the areas of concern, he said. In addition, he explained that the borough also has an ordinance prohibiting signs from comprising more than 10 percent of the area of a window in which it's placed.

As for maintenance, borough officials are looking to ensure sturdy construction and cleanliness of signs along with well-maintained storefronts and properties, he said.

Evidence of such enforcement is prevalent at the Speco Tile & Marble building, now for sale, at 139 Mercer St., according to Mr. Rosenberg.

"This is a structure that has been in disrepair for some time," he said. "Through recent enforcement it now has a new roof and an improved façade. Once occupied, this will be a vital link that will tie the north and south ends of our business

district together.”

The building was the site of an oil spill July 20, and police charged a contractor and the owner in connection with oil from a tank that made its way from the street to One Mile Road in East Windsor.

Acting on behalf of the Hightstown Environmental Commission, Mr. Rosenberg said he also reached out to the owners of Famiglia’s Plaza on Franklin Street to address the property’s condition — mainly the need for landscaping improvements. The commission recommended, among other things, weed, small shrub and loose stump removal, the pruning of trees, the addition of mulch beds and the construction of footpaths from the sidewalk to parking lot.

“They pretty much followed them (the recommendations) to the letter,” Mr. Rosenberg said.

In terms of making businesses feel at home, Downtown Hightstown launched a Web site in May that has three main goals:

- listing local community and cultural events;
- acting as a local business guide for local residents; and
- acting as a welcome guide for visitors.

Since July 22, two new businesses have opened downtown — Bistro Soleil at 173 Mercer St. and Ayom Day Spa at 104 Mercer St. — and Musing Antiques is scheduled to open at the Smith House at 137 Stockton St. following renovations.

And for the owners, Hightstown has felt like home so far.

“I saw that there was an opportunity to pursue my dreams, and I took it,” said Anju Malesha, the East Windsor resident who owns Ayom, a new business. “Hightstown had always come across to me as a homey, cute town.”

For Jim Hayes, owner of Bistro Soleil, choosing Hightstown was an easy decision.

“Living in Twin Rivers, I like the fact that it’s close to home,” Mr. Hayes said. “My children go to the YMCA right up the street from the restaurant too, so it’s a very good fit.”

Mr. Hayes said he’s had a “100 percent positive experience” working with the town and that he expects it to continue.

He described the restaurant, which is located in the building that used to house Genovese’s restaurant, as casual and serving “upscale American cuisine.”

Dimitri Musing, owner of Musing Antiques, could not be reached for comment.

In addition to the new businesses, Theo’s Lakeside Tavern has a new owner who has said he plans significant improvements.

Information about the businesses can be found at www.downtownhightstown.org, including details regarding grand-opening ceremonies.

The Web site is the first step in Downtown Hightstown’s ultimate goal of getting the borough’s downtown revitalization designated a Main Street Program by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which could put it in line for funding. The Borough Council indicated at budget time in 2007 that the borough does not have the money to help in that cause.

Mr. Rosenberg called the recent downtown progress “exciting.”

“We are trying to build a place where there is a fun, prosperous and inviting atmosphere as well as a positive climate of businesses helping businesses,” he said.