

Mayor's Column

May 8, 2017

The first meeting of our reconvened Retail Mix and Marketing Committee – an assembly of merchants, landlords, building owners, Chamber of Commerce officers, Village officials and residents will take place on May 17th.

As a Village citizen, I chaired the first Retail Mix Committee tasked by Mayor Nancy Hand to grapple with the store closures during the economic downturn of the early 1990's. The template of the original committee was very successful so we are reinstituting this coming together of constituent groups.

The primary recommendation of the early 1990's Committee was to retain the consulting firm Rodger and McCauley, Inc. to evaluate the existing storefront retail mix and make recommendations to improve the retail conditions as they existed at the time as well as provide a blueprint for long term viability.

Many of their observations still ring true twenty five years later and are worth a revisit. They also offer a framework in which to evaluate current retail conditions in an historical context.

- The consultants viewed the Village's commercial district's architecture and the size and scale of the buildings as a major aesthetic asset and well suited to retail stores.
- Though they thought the mix of retail categories was fairly broad, they believed banks, cleaners, and beauty salons were over represented.

The consultants commented that although the overall appearance of the Village is quite pleasing, some of the stores needed cosmetic improvement – awnings needing repair or replacement, windows washed more regularly, display areas needing professional merchandising and sidewalks and entries decluttered.

- The professionals felt the linear flow of retail stores was interrupted by a disproportionate number of service businesses. In their view, our retail mix was underserved in the following categories based on observation and interviews with residents:
 - Apparel for teen customers
 - Bed/Bath Shop
 - Gourmet Store
 - Shoes for all ages

Outdoor Clothing

Lingerie

Music Store

Pet Supply Store

Sporting Goods

Kitchenware/Housewares

Contemporary Gift Store

- Some of the businesses above did come to the Village with varying degrees of success and longevity. One can guess that the needs or gaps in merchandise are much the same now but don't always translate into a successful undertaking.

The consultants also favored leasing to tried and true retailers who had a “track record” and they were not adverse to chains if they were high quality and met a demonstrable need.

One recommendation that unfortunately does not correspond with 2017 shopping patterns was to severely limit service business vs soft goods retailing. In today's reality, if you can buy an exact replica tax free on the internet, it is so challenging to sell same in a bricks and mortar store.

Rodgers and McCauley placed great emphasis on streetscape with emphasis on the maintenance and appearance of the interiors and exteriors of the stores and surrounding flowers and area plantings. In general, they thought all constituent groups, landlord, merchant and Village could do a better job sprucing up the visual aesthetics.

To summarize, the professionals thought Bronxville's positive attributes as a shopping destination were the attractive and varied architecture, well-tended green spaces, proximity to the commuter train, the presence of a movie theater, varied restaurant choices, mature trees, well maintained sidewalks, attractive signage, comfortable pedestrian scale and an overall feel of historical significance and friendliness.

In their estimation, our constraints or downsides included an unattractive underpass connecting the two commercial districts, unclear signage, unattractive tree pits, not enough on street parking and dated window displays.

Using the Rodgers and McCauley analysis as an historical lynchpin, the reconfigured committee will tackle many of the same issues from a 2017 perspective.

Knowing Village government has an important role to play, the Trustees and I have been reviewing opportunities to increase parking inventory, working on our Community Plan to streamline approval processes as well as revisiting our restrictions on service businesses and partnering with the Chamber on events to stimulate customer interest and foot traffic.

My hope is that all constituent groups come to the table ready to tackle issues including:

Are the Village rents fair and comparable to like communities?

What stores would meet the needs of 2017 consumers?

How can we recruit new stores, advertise in a tech savvy way to reach the target audience, and get the message out that shopping local sustains our community?

Who is patronizing our stores? Who is not?

How can we provide a shopping experience that makes people want to purchase locally?

I believe we are truly at a crossroads in terms of the vitality of our downtown and we all have to care to make sure it remains a vibrant, successful component of our Village life. On a personal note, I just returned from a visit to my hometown in upstate New York and it reinforced how wonderful it is to live in a small caring community – the bakery owner inquired about mom and her bad hip; the butcher gently reminded me mom never paid for her charity raffle tickets and the ice cream store owner remembered what college I attended.

Bronxville has the same magical intangible; the joy of the human connection and all the wonders that flow from it. We need to work together to preserve our precious commodity.