

**DAILY NEWS****Rockaway Commercial Strip is Ready for Its Close Up After Sandy Forced Its Facelift**

BY LISA L. COLANGELO



*Robert Walsh, commissioner of the NYC Department of Small Business Services, has been working with merchants along Beach 116th St. to rebuild their shops after they were damaged by Hurricane Sandy.*

They are more than just signs of life along Beach 116th St. in Rockaway.

A set of new awnings and storefronts is giving the commercial strip, slammed hard by Hurricane Sandy, a more uniform and clean look.

Now merchants are hoping a fledgling effort to fill up vacant storefronts and showcase

decrepit hotels will help the street fulfill its potential as the gateway to Rockaway.

On Nov. 2, the city's Department of Small Business Services is hosting a "Rolling Up the Gates" event for entrepreneurs to eyeball empty space along the street.

"I could see this as a Farmer's Market," said SBS Commissioner Robert Walsh, pointing to a weed-choked, padlocked parking lot close to the beach. "There is so much potential."

Despite its proximity to the A train and buses, Beach 116th St. never fully caught the wave of attention that helped revitalize other sections of Rockaway prior to the storm.

Now, after Sandy forced business owners to start from scratch, they are fighting to win back old customers and find new ones.

"It's a renovation I didn't plan on," jokes Daniel Mirkin, who had to replace computers, phones and lighting after his store, Mirkin Vision, filled with 18 inches of water. "But we feel lucky. We didn't lose everything."

Denise Diehm smiles next to a magnet that reads "Sandy Who?" — one of the whimsical items in her shop "The Gift is Love."

But she recalled dark times after the storm which even destroyed her display cabinets.

"We prayed a lot," she said.



*These Rockaway businesses along Beach 116th St. received help from the city under its storefront improvement program to create a more uniform and clean landscape on the commercial corridor.*

Since the storm, Small Business Services has handed out more than \$400,000 in grants to 26 businesses in the area to help them rebuild.

Tom Hughes of Station Liquors said he was heartened to see longtime customers return to shop even when they weren't back in their own homes.

"I didn't think we would make it through this year," he said.

Hughes said the \$15,000 grant he received was helpful but he still needed loans to fix his flooded store and replenish his stock.

"Although it helps you stay in business, I'll be paying that probably for the rest of my life," said the 55-year-old Hughes.

The storefronts initiative was a boost for Paul Ohana of ADP Signs and Awnings, a local merchant whose shop was destroyed by the storm.

He has crafted many of the new signs from his replacement shop on Beach 116th St.

"The street looks great and not just because I did all the signs there," he said with a smile.