

# SBS IN THE NEWS



## Revisiting Williamsburg Walks

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By Aaron Short

Williamsburg Walks brought more foot traffic to a vehicle-free Bedford Avenue during the summer weeks, but local businesses are still clamoring about a decline in revenue they experienced during the open-street event.

"There were some Saturdays during Williamsburg Walks when we had no revenue, and we depend on weekends to make a profit," said Jill Goldhand, the owner of A&G Merch owner, on North 6th and Berry Street.

Last week, local business owners met face-to face with Williamsburg Walks organizers in a roundtable meeting at Monsignor Alexius Senior Center (290 Bedford Ave.), to discuss ways to improve the six-week summer street festival.

Many retailers suggested improving signage towards businesses located on and off Bedford Avenue, enforcing permitting for street vendors, and possibly moving Williamsburg Walks to a side street such as Grand Street.

In its second year, Williamsburg Walks is a pilot program of a Department of Transportation citywide initiative known as Summer Streets, designed to make neighborhood thoroughfares more pedestrian-friendly. The initiative is expected to be renewed, though organizers including Williamsburg Walks' Gregor Nemitz-Ziadie and Neighborhood Alliance for Good Growth's Peter Gillespie understand that some changes may be necessary to improve relations with Williamsburg's businesses.

"What I liked about the meeting is it went from a list of complaints to something more constructive with input from the merchants and I thought it was a good buy-in from the whole crowd in the end," said Nemitz-Ziadie.

One organization, the East Williamsburg Valley Industrial Development Corporation, may play a key

role in the long-term stability of small businesses on Bedford Avenue. The group is trying to form a merchants association in the Northside, after receiving a grant this fall from the city's Department of Small Business Services.

For Felice Kirby, a community organizer and restaurant owner of Teddy's (96 Berry St.), an increase in organizing among local businesses can mean more services for neighborhood businesses that need them.

Kirby, who came to Williamsburg in 1983 as an organizer with People's Firehouse, recounted a scene of boarded-up businesses and rampant crime to many of the young business owners now complaining about losing revenue because customers are distracted by free activities on the street.

"The merchants operating in this marketplace face challenges including transportation services that have not grown to match development in this area, including garbage and sanitation services that don't match the demand of the local population," said Kirby. "These problems, the details of how vehicular traffic is kept away from our area to promote pedestrian traffic can be influenced by the way we organize as merchants."