

SBS IN THE NEWS



After two fires, Bronx area struggles to rebound

By Hilary Potkewitz
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Merchants in the Norwood section of the Bronx are facing a trial by fire this winter. In addition to dealing with the sluggish economy that's hitting retail strips throughout the city, businesses along Norwood's main commercial strip, Bainbridge Avenue, are coping with the aftereffects of two major fires. On Halloween, flames swept through 14 shops, and just before Christmas, a huge conflagration struck an adjacent block, destroying the neighborhood's supermarket and a popular diner.

"The community is certainly stressed," says City Councilman G. Oliver Koppell, whose district includes Norwood. "This is not an affluent community, but that strip was pretty healthy, with not a lot of vacancies."

Local leaders are concerned that the strip's mix of local stores, rather than well-known, deep-pocketed chains, will make the damage harder to overcome.

"This is not the kind of place that you'd come to from far away to shop," Mr. Koppell says.

State of emergency

A venerable bakery, a popular diner, a dentist's office, a fish store and a butcher shop are all gone. In response, the city's Department of Small Business Services just

held an emergency meeting with local officials and city aid agencies to assess the area's needs.

"We're trying to do the best we can, given what are horribly adverse conditions for these businesses," says David Margalit, deputy commissioner at SBS. "Ideally, we're hoping to restore the corridor where they're located, but our goal is to help them land as softly as possible."

The agency is working with nearly 20 businesses, expediting insurance claims, connecting merchants with legal aid and restoring utilities. The office also offers relocation assistance. So far, a barbershop has already moved, while several other businesses are considering their options.

One of the hardest-hit merchants is vowing to return.

"This is something I've never experienced before," says Noah Katz, whose family has owned the Foodtown grocery store on 204th Street since his grandfather opened it in the 1950s. "But we are committed to serving this community. We will rebuild."

Reopening by summer

In fact, he's already hired an architect to work on the new store, which he will expand to 10,000 square feet, from 6,500 square feet. He has arranged to take the space

formerly held by the dentist's office and diner. He hopes to reopen by summer.

In the meantime, Mr. Katz is trying to hold on to his customers by stocking the nearby Pricebusters, a variety store he also owns, with grocery items. He is also offering a delivery service from another supermarket his family owns about 40 blocks away.

Nevertheless, "it's devastating for the community," says Fernando Tirado, district manager of Bronx Community Board 7. The Foodtown was the only supermarket serving Norwood and nearby Bedford Park.

But at least Mr. Katz plans to rebuild, and that's good news for the store's 40

employees, who are temporarily working at his other stores.

For other shop owners and their workers, the future is far less bright. One of the stores destroyed in the December blaze, the Bainbridge Bakery, had just finished renovations after a kitchen fire in April.

Ana Mirbita, who has owned the bakery for nearly 20 years with her husband, doesn't know whether she will rebuild. She says she's not sure if she has the energy.

"We've been trying to help her out, but everything is working against her," says Mr. Tirado. "They've had that bakery there forever, and now she's being literally driven out of the community by this fire."