



## Staten Island Advance

### On Your Block: Small-Time Feel, but Big-Time Shopping on Forest Avenue

BY MARJORIE HACK



*Traffic travels west down Forest Avenue past many of the small businesses*

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. — Little by little, one busy commercial area after another on Staten Island has faded from its glory days. Over 50 years ago, the last of the village shops in Stapleton shut down bit by bit as the once-thriving neighborhood beer factories were all but gone.

The Port Richmond Avenue strip, where so many Staten Islanders went to shop for everything from clothing to school supplies, lost a good part of its business to the Staten Island Mall shortly after it opened in 1973.

Residents of Tottenville recently lamented the declining fortunes of Main Street, which is no longer the bustling commercial area it once was, thanks to the rise of the big-box shopping plazas known as Bricktown Centre and South Shore Commons not far away in Charleston.

But there is a group of retailers in West Brighton who seem to be bucking the decline in interest of neighborhood brick-and-mortar. As a group, they're located on Forest Avenue between Hart Boulevard and Broadway, and they make up the Forest Avenue Business Improvement District (BID).

According to a website called Ape Shall Not Kill Ape: Documenting Staten Island's North Shore, the strip is "one of the most important commercial avenues on Staten Island."

Loretta Cauldwell, executive director of the West Brighton Local Development Corp. and director of the BID, believes the BID, which was signed into law in November 2004, has played a role in this, but she said the success of the retailers really tracks back to those who patronize them.

"Part of it has to do with the community. People tend to stay here and they're committed to shopping in their community. Their children tend to stay here," she said, noting that she herself is an example of the dynamic.

Vincent D'Antuono, owner of Pastosa Ravioli at 764 Forest Ave., agrees.

“We have a unique clientele that looks for quality product and supports local business. Most areas get hurt by big-box stores. But most around here shop small,” he said.

### **WHAT’S A BID?**

A BID is a corporation with a board of directors drawn from its constituency. Property owners and merchants along Forest Avenue contribute money to the BID, which, in turn, provides services, like graffiti removal, street cleaning and help with hanging holiday lighting, marketing and event planning. The board meets periodically to discuss projects it would like to undertake. Most businesses along this stretch of Forest Avenue belong to the BID.

Right now, explained Ms. Cauldwell, “we’re trying to make this a walkable community,” which is why the group’s two signature events — a Holiday Stroll and a Spring Stroll — are called just that: Strolls. The Holiday Stroll is scheduled for Dec. 5. It offers shoppers and members of the community an opportunity to take a walk down a few blocks and check out the products available from different vendors.

Vacancies along Forest Avenue these days are relatively low, according to both D’Antuono and Ms. Cauldwell. But back in the 1980s, admits Ms. Cauldwell, times were tougher. Back then, the avenue was known as much for its bar scene as its banks and specialty shops.

### **BIG CHANGE**

In fact, up until about 20 years ago, according to Ape Shall Not Kill Ape, “The stretch between Oakwood and Bement used to be called Peter Pan Alley because it was lined with Irish bars, the denizens were green and never grew up.”

Lore has it that this depiction was coined by a former teacher at St. Peter’s Boys High School who was amazed that he would still see former students parked on a bar stool 20 years later, when they were in their 30s.

The status quo began to change a while back, sometime around the end of the 1980s, according to Ms. Cauldwell.

“There are fewer bars and more restaurants. We’re trying to keep it a friendly place for all. It’s a quality of life issue,” she said.

In the BID’s printed Restaurant and Food Guide, mainstays like Jody’s Club Forest and The Black Dog are referred to as “taverns.” (Word to the wise: There is usually some slipping back to old patterns when the St. Patrick’s Parade steps off each year.

No one is quite sure why Castleton Avenue, just a few blocks north, has not been able to replicate the Forest Avenue model.

“There’s a greater concentration, a greater variety of businesses up here,” said Ms. Cauldwell. I don’t think it [Castleton] is bringing the same type of foot traffic. They just have pockets on Castleton.”

D'Antuono can't cite a reason, but he knows the two thoroughfares are light years apart in personality and style. "Somehow, they lost it," he said. "A lot of little restaurants closed. You've got the German restaurant [Nurnberger Bierhaus] and Dick's Deli, but it's not what it was."

Some are seeing that Forest Avenue is clicking and want to be part of the action. According to Ms. Cauldwell, Gifted, a gift shop that had operated on Castleton Avenue for a few years, is moving up to Forest Avenue and reopening.

### **A CULTURE**

Ms. Cauldwell believes a BID could help revive Castleton Avenue. But then again, she believes, "a BID would help everywhere," she said.

Jean Daggan, owner of Jean's Fine Wines at 642 Forest Ave., believes the BID has been a plus, but she, like Ms. Cauldwell, believes there is more behind it. "I swear by the BID, I swear by the block, I swear by the area," she said. She admits her prices are a bit higher than many of her competitors across the borough.

"But I give you more for your little more money. The majority of people in this neighborhood understand this. They get it. They support it. They increase our value [as businesses]. We increase their value [as homeowners]."

She lives three blocks from her shop and says she's far from the only business owner in the BID who lives in West Brighton.

"It's Americana. You could go to Indiana and find this. If you're smart, you preserve it," she said.