

**C BUSINESS**  
 Along Post Avenue in Westbury, new storefronts invite people to stroll the sidewalks as they did 25 years ago, before national chains lured shoppers away from the village's mom-and-pop retailers.



PHOTO BY HOWARD SCHNAPP

# Post Avenue puts on a new face

■ **Westbury aims to lift the downtown's reputation with \$3.5M to broaden commerce, revitalize community**

BY KRISTINA FIORE  
 STAFF WRITER

When Mark Kistoo saw the first-floor retail space in the newly constructed Horizon at Westbury building on Post Avenue, he knew it was the perfect location for the coffee shop he'd been wanting to open.

It had two important elements necessary for a successful business: location and customers. It was on a pleasant main street next to a train station, in a community with near-

ly 200 new housing units.

To Kistoo, an accountant who just quit his job at a law firm to start a business venture, Westbury has all the potential to be a hot spot on Long Island. Yes, the same Westbury that shoppers and business owners had given up on 15 years ago.

During the past six years, Westbury's downtown Post Avenue district has seen a revitalization: Storefront renovations have attracted business owners as a housing boom has generated shoppers. Village officials are working hard to turn Post Avenue into a district suitable for strolling like it was 25 years ago, before major retailers stole business from main street mom-and-pop shops.

Kistoo felt his coffeehouse, A Midnight Summer's Dream,

would fit perfectly into the image that officials have planned for the village. "They want my store to be the first step," Kistoo said.

Through state and local grants as well as a tax through the Business Improvement District (BID), the village has financed a \$3.5-million revitalization project that has brought a 20 percent business vacancy rate down to 4 percent, according to Mayor Ernest Strada. Businesses have spruced themselves up, and new housing units have increased foot traffic.

Along Post Avenue, most storefronts have replaced their neon-lit signs with wood-carved ones painted red or green, a look more like that of a New England village. Potted flowers hang outside many of the shops; lamp-

posts are black wrought iron, and street signs are enameled.

Along the half-mile shopping district, professional offices sit next to insurance agencies and banks. Four barbershops, seven nail salons and several Hispanic markets and delis — a reflection of Post Avenue's large Hispanic population — are in the mix.

## Setback in the past

Just 15 years ago the vacancy rate was high because, as with many main streets, Westbury retailers suffered a setback as national stores began popping up on nearby Old Country and Glen Cove roads. As it became more depressed, the town developed somewhat of a bad rep.

"I had secretaries who were afraid to interview with me because they heard 'Westbury'

and thought it was a bad area," said Mike Deiflk, former president of the Westbury Chamber of Commerce who came to Westbury to open a law office on Post Avenue in 1999.

"It needed a face-lift," said Gerry Sweeney, executive director of Westbury's Business Improvement District, which the village created in 1993 to start the revitalization.

In 1999, the first BID project was to renovate storefronts. The district mandated new signs and pitched in money to help business owners pay for them. Planters and new street signs followed in 2002, and the street's new image began to emerge.

"The first business involved was Alfredo's Pizza, and that building turned out fantastic," Sweeney said. "When people

saw they were getting financial help, they jumped on the bandwagon." Today, many business owners are pleased because the renovation has spurred sales.

"Ten years ago there were unoccupied stores. Now, [business] is going great," said Joseph Friar, owner of Friar's Tavern, which has been on Post Avenue since 1936. Friar is redesigning the tavern's interior and facade with BID help. Previously, it had only a few small windows and a faded sign. "Hopefully we're going to have even more [customers]," Friar said.

In 2001, Roman Yusupov decided Post Avenue was a good location, and he opened Roman's Barbershop. "It changed for the better," he said of the downtown district. "With all the apartments coming in, I

think it's going to be better for the future [of the businesses]."

## Biz and housing mix

Pearl Kamer, chief economist for the Long Island Association, says Westbury is a good case study of downtown revitalization, and she praised the village's simultaneous spurt of housing and business. "That's what you have to do if you want a revitalization," she said.

Much of the \$3.5 million spent on the revitalization was financed through federal and state grants funneled through Nassau County's office of Housing and Intergovernmental Affairs, village clerk Tom Savino said.

The BID financed about 15 percent of the total revitalization by

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WESTBURY from A38

taxing businesses in the district, which spans Post Avenue from Old Country Road to the Northern State Parkway. Each business pays BID a tax equal to 18 percent of its village tax. Only about 5 percent of the project was funded directly through taxpayer dollars, Savino said.

Post Avenue remains a work in progress. Two years ago the village drafted a new master plan for the business district, and last year it hired a real estate consultant and a marketing firm to help attract the kinds of businesses the street is lacking.

## Eye on more chains

"We're trying to change the integrity of the shopping area," said Mitchell Friedman, vice president of sales for Pliskin Realty and Development, the village's real estate consulting firm. Friedman said his team is looking to bring in more clients like The Gap or the Annex to complement the existing branches of national chains: Dunkin' Donuts, Bank of America and CVS.

Sweeney, Westbury's BID executive director, said she hopes to encourage more diverse types of businesses on the street, adding that boutiques, restaurants and a stationery store are also necessary for success. Friedman plans to work with commercial landlords on Post Avenue to attract "stronger" tenants.

"We don't need the [repetition] of . . . beauty salons and nail salons," Sweeney said. "We can do very well with just a few."

Savino hopes the improvements will also attract shoppers from surrounding towns, because Westbury is in the heart of Nassau County. Sweeney said the village has more than enough parking to accommodate out-of-towners, with a new lot near the Horizon at Westbury building as well as existing municipal lots.

More than 180 units of housing were added with the construction of Horizon at Westbury and another new condominium complex, Maple Towers. Most residents are either young professionals or retirees, and Sweeney hopes they will shop locally and look to the

downtown for entertainment.

"We don't want them just to sleep here and get on the train in the morning," she said. "We want them to participate in their hometown."

To achieve that goal, the village plans to complete a village "piazza" by fall and is looking into a possible revitalization of the Westbury Theater.

## Arts center seen a key

Strada believes the theater is

key to the revitalization. Cyrus Hakakian purchased the run-down theater through his clothing company Cyrus Knits at a bankruptcy auction last year. This is his first theater-revitalization project, and he wants to turn it into a performing arts center with a restaurant, office space and some residential units. Strada said parking regulations mandated by village codes, however, continue to hinder the project.

"Once that building takes on a live appearance, the village is going to be reborn," Strada said. "We'll become a beehive of activity."

Michael Lettera, who moved to the Westbury Terrace Condominium near Post Avenue in 2000, is impressed with the revitalization. He said the market value of his condo has nearly doubled in the six years he's been here.

"In the future, if I bring some-

one here who hasn't been here for 10 years," he said, "they're not going to believe what it was like 20 years ago."

Savino thinks Lettera and others who have bought property in the village in recent years are the lucky ones.

"We're like a blue-chip company that's been reformed and introduced at an IPO," he said. "Buy us now, because you won't be able to afford us in a couple years."

# Not everyone's sold on it, yet

BY KRISTINA FIORE  
STAFF WRITER

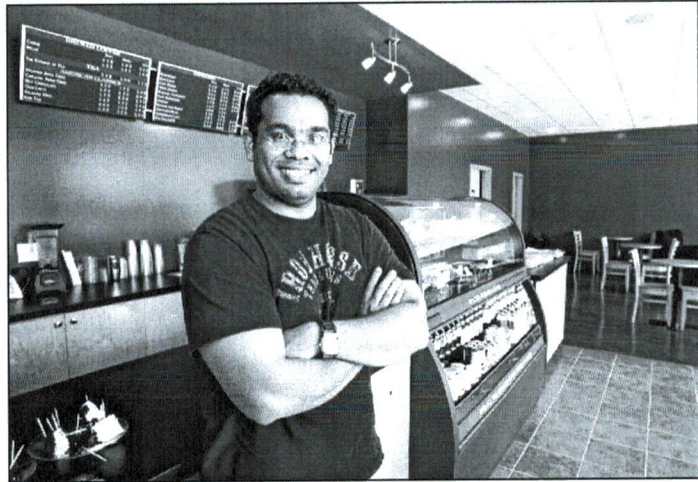
When Mark Kistoo opened his new coffeehouse on Post Avenue, he thought it would be advantageous that his wife, Maria, is Ecuadorian. He knew the business district had a large Hispanic population and thought Maria could make those customers feel at home by speaking their language.

But Maria Kistoo hasn't had to rely on her language skills yet. "A lot of them walk by, look in, and walk away," Mark Kistoo said.

The store, A Midnight Summer's Dream, is part of the village's Post Avenue revitalization effort, which intends to turn the main street area into what's become known as a stroller district — a shopping area that's comfortable for pedestrians — by attracting more upscale, national retailers. Yet some wonder what effect the upturn will have on the Hispanic population and its numerous markets and delis there.

Mitchell Friedman, vice president of sales for Pliskin Realty and Development, the village's realty consulting firm, said his company is working with building owners to bring in "stronger," more upscale, tenants. He's already started a database that notes the square footage and lease expiration dates for the storefronts.

The street now is lined with a number of Hispanic delis, markets and salons, most of which cater to clientele from



Mark Kistoo's new coffeehouse joins a number of delis, markets and salons on Post Avenue in Westbury, many of which cater to the diverse Hispanic community.

PHOTO BY HOWARD SCHNAPP

specific countries. El Pueblito, a butcher shop, caters to Colombian customers, while Cremona Market, whose owners are from Honduras, attracts a different crowd.

Gerry Sweeney, executive director of the downtown Business Improvement District, says the village doesn't need so many markets selling similar items, and she said that reducing the number of such stores "probably will" change the diversity of the shoppers.

Julian Huertas, manager of the Bank of America on Post Avenue and a member of the improvement district, said specialized Hispanic businesses there are thriving because they cater to the needs of the population.

But he said there's a need for more professional services for Hispanics, such as lawyers' and doctors' offices.

Lewis Milhim opened his dental practice on Post Avenue about a month ago and has had a fast start, he said. He attracts Hispanic clients, he said, in part because his front desk receptionists are bilingual.

Leslie Escobar, an accountant who is fluent in Spanish, communicates easily with the 90 percent of her clients who are Hispanic. She came to Post Avenue three years ago and says her business is booming.

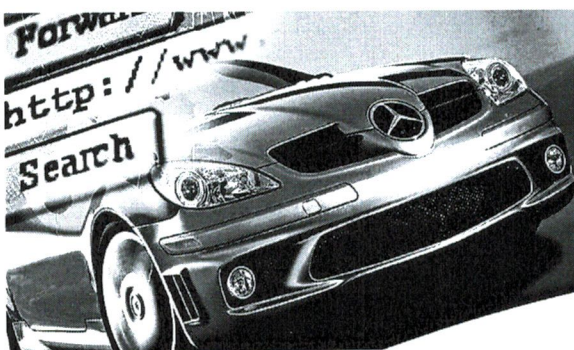
"You have to look at the whole neighborhood, not just the street," he said. "Just because they're changing the look

doesn't mean it's going to drive people out of their homes."

Village clerk Tom Savino said he intends for the diversity to be incorporated into the downtown's new look. "I think that the cultures will assimilate into this diverse community, rather than the downtown dictating who will come in," he said.

Mike Lettera, a resident of Westbury Terrace Condominium, said one reason he chose to live in Westbury was for its diversity. He says he hopes the revitalization can incorporate what he feels is an important aspect of Post Avenue culture.

"To me," he said, "that is one of the biggest challenges in making the revitalization a success for all stakeholders."



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