



Journal Square

BY JOEL SAMBERG

If the students at Hudson County Community College ever have to do a detailed study on the thriving revitalization of a major commercial district, they can stay right where they are. In fact, the college itself has enjoyed the kind of expansion and positive feedback in Journal Square that the young scholars would probably end up writing about in their reports.

Journal Square has been called the core, the heart and the hub not only of Jersey City, but of all of Hudson County. A few years ago it was reported to be 'rising like a Phoenix' from the significant economic challenges of years past. While there is still much to be addressed, it is a now a district with a clear vision and the kind of community-commercial partnerships needed to make those visions come true.

No Shadow Zone

"I like the fact that so many people in Journal Square focus on the positive aspects of what's going on around the district and do what they can to spread the news about our neighborhoods and activities," says Allen Magrini, chairman of the Journal Square Restoration Corporation (JSRC) and vice president of Hartz Mountain Industries. As Magrini suggests, with a district as complex and diverse as Journal Square, sometimes the positive news gets overshadowed by the negative.

The JSRC was formed in 1995 to operate the Journal Square Special Improvement District, which is the largest of Jersey City's four SIDs. It operates within a city-designated Urban Enterprise Zone, allowing

certain tax benefits to qualified businesses in an effort to help the local economy and aid in overall district improvements.

Front and Center

Improvements are already being noticed by business owners, residents and visitors—in addition to the 8000 college students and 30,000 PATH train commuters who pass through day after day. Trees have been planted, pedestrian plazas have been improved, new lighting has been installed, and plenty of new construction is being designed and approved, with groundbreakings an almost ongoing event.

Today, among the facilities being built or renovated are several office facilities, residential rental units, stores and restaurants, and the old State Theater, which first opened in 1923, went through various incarnations, and has been a vacant shell for years. The new building, to be called State Square, will have 130 residential units (about 20 percent reserved for lower income families), 15,000 square feet of retail space on the ground floor, and a much-needed 300-space parking garage.

Food for Thought

Hudson County Community College is also growing with a new Culinary Arts Institute. The expanded facility will house classrooms, a conference center, and several high-tech kitchens. Phase one of the project is expected to be completed in July 2005, and phase two a year later. The site, on Newkirk Street, will enable the college to add 200 more students to its culinary program. "In addition," says President Glen Gabert, "it will provide a state-of-the-art conference center

right here in Journal Square, which we could use very much."

Adds Scott Harwood, treasurer of the JSRC and one of the owners of the State Theater property, "There hasn't been any major construction in Journal Square in 30 years. The community is behind all of these efforts."

Elliot Braha, secretary of the JSRC and owner of Lords, a popular children's department store, notes that the district has always been special, "but the status quo is never okay. Maintaining the status quo is not a good message to send to the community or to people looking at Journal Square as a potential site for new business." That's why all the activity fostered by the JSRC, such as facade enhancement programs, parking improvement studies, and publicity efforts, are of such great importance.

All in all, Journal Square is, was, and will certainly continue to be a retail and cultural destination of choice. It is more than just a central business district. It is also a place where farmers markets and sidewalk sales are part of the natural landscape, where ethnic diversity means some of the finest restaurants in the county, and where the makeup of the various boards and organizations devoted to improvement is proof positive that interest in the future of Journal Square is as expansive, and as genuine, as it could possibly be.

There are a lot of goals and plans on their agenda. Mediocrity isn't one of them.

For more information on Journal Square, visit www.thenewjournalssquare.com.