

Queens nabe makes BID to clean up

The rare ouster of a district's leader clears way for fresh start on 82nd Street

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THREE-SIDED OPPORTUNITY: Seth Taylor has high hopes for Dunningham Triangle.

Lampposts have a fresh coat of paint, new trash bins stand at regular intervals, and sidewalks and streets are cleaner than ever along a five-block stretch on and off 82nd Street, straddling the dividing line between Jackson Heights and Elmhurst in Queens.

It's a marked—and much-needed—change from what Robert Walsh saw there back in December. “Benches were broken, trees were missing, and graffiti was on storefronts,” said Mr. Walsh. “The district had been in neglect.”

Alerted to the problems by local officials, the commissioner of the city's Department of Small Business Services, which oversees New York's 67 Business Improvement Districts, went out to see for himself. Unhappy with what he found, he took a rare step in January, ousting the 82nd Street Partnership's executive director. To replace him, Mr. Walsh tapped Seth Taylor, a seasoned BID veteran.

In his first three months on the job, Mr. Taylor hired a new sanitation contractor and reached out to local businesses to help whip the area back into working order. In the longer term, he hopes to turn an unused street triangle into a workable public space, add outdoor artwork and lighted signs, host cultural events to help promote the area and improve parking.

“The neighborhood has a great feel and a lot of energy,” said Mr. Taylor, who honed his skills working over the past six years at different BIDs, including two of the largest—Manhattan's 34th Street Partnership and the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership. “With its vibrant, diverse mix of businesses, 82nd Street can become a destination not just for locals.”

His new BID is in a predominantly South American immigrant community. The district boasts roughly 40 property owner-members and 140 businesses. Among them are law firms, discount clothing stores, bakeries, taquerias and one of the few privately owned movie theaters left in the city—the Jackson Heights Cinema. Major chains, including Radio Shack, and a number of bank branches are also there.

'Healthy business'

It is an eclectic mix that by most accounts weathered the recession well. Today, there are only two vacant storefronts in an area where properties tend to be owned for generations.

"We have a healthy business corridor," said the area's City Council member, Julissa Ferreras, a Jackson Heights native, who was one of those who alerted Mr. Walsh to the BID's shortcomings and their mounting consequences.

Created in 1990, the 82nd Street Business Improvement District, like other districts, is a nonprofit created by the community to keep designated areas clean and safe and to promote economic development. Businesses and property owners agree to pay an annual assessment to support the districts. In the case of 82nd Street, the BID has an annual budget of roughly \$225,000, according to Mr. Taylor, who hopes to increase it eventually to as much as \$275,000.

Under leadership that had been in place for almost 10 years, however, that budget seemed to be producing less and less, with litter and complaints of management complacency growing in tandem. With new management in place, attitudes have shifted radically.

"Now I feel like I am putting my dollars to good use," said Sam Sabbagh, owner of Galleria Home Décor, a retailer that has been in the area for more than 25 years and that pays \$7,200 a year in taxes that go toward the partnership. "Seth is making an effort to make the area even more attractive to visitors."

That includes working with merchants to bring them into compliance with the complex restrictions that come with a portion of the BID lying within the Jackson Heights Historic District. Among the things retailers didn't know was what kind of signs they could put up. Recently, Mr. Taylor brought in officials from the city Landmarks Preservation Commission to meet with merchants and property owners to educate them on what can and can't be done.

Better communication

"Now we can get help and answers," said John Rapp, a property owner in the district for almost 30 years as well as chairman of the partnership's board. "There is more communication between the businesses on the street, the BID and the city."

Next up for Mr. Taylor is Dunningham Triangle on the Elmhurst end of the district. He hopes to add benches, chairs and tables, and bring more people to the small but quaint area dotted with trees and ringed with a handsome iron fence. In response to suggestions from some of his members, he is also looking into extending the time limit on one-hour street parking in the area.

That would be good news for Steve Gruber, the third-generation owner of Consolidated Vacuum Co., which sells and services vacuum cleaners and sewing machines. Half of his business comes from outside the neighborhood. "Shoppers don't come back after they get a parking ticket," he said.