

82nd St. Partnership shows pride in project



Photo by Bill Parry

Commissioner Robert Walsh of the Department of Small Business Services cut the ribbon celebrating business restoration. Photo by Bill Parry

By Bill Parry

The 82nd Street partnership and several Jackson Heights business owners Tuesday celebrated the completion of a restoration project that upgraded several storefronts, but the event was marred by protesters who are fighting the BID's plan to expand into Corona.

City Small Business Services Commissioner Robert Walsh joined representatives of the city Landmarks Preservation Commission and other community leaders and the owners of five stores for a ribbon-cutting ceremony to unveil a building restoration on 82nd Street on the corner of Roosevelt Avenue.

The gathering marked the end of the first stage of the 82nd Street Partnership's "Storefront Restoration Program" that is upgrading three different properties on 82nd Street between Roosevelt and 37th avenues.

"We provided grants to five businesses to upgrade their storefronts and expand their customer base," said Seth Taylor, the business improvement district's executive director. The project's first phase took seven weeks to complete and Sagitario Bakery, the Top Gun clothing store, Mike's Jewelry and two Devison Jewelry stores now have brand new façades.

The program aims to improve business conditions and preserve retail diversity and Jackson Heights' quality of life.

The building's landlord could not have improved the storefronts without the assistance provided by the program.

"This building is in a landmark district, so it's difficult to improve the store," owner John Rapp said. "The BID and Commissioner Walsh did that for me. They tied me into a city program. I spent \$120,000 on the project and I got a \$10,000 rebate. That way I didn't have to raise the rents on my tenants."

The self-described “good landlord” agreed with Taylor that the renovation project makes the neighborhood more attractive and inviting to shoppers.

The Business Improvement District’s efforts do not please everyone, however.

As the business people and community leaders wrapped up their ribbon-cutting, a vocal band of 15 protesters arrived chanting “No to the BID” in English and Spanish. The group of street vendors and small business owners known as the Roosevelt Avenue Community Alliance is fighting the proposed expansion of the BID into Corona.

“Street vendors and small business owners are at risk,” said Rafael Samanez, executive director of Vamos Unidos, a nonprofit organizer of immigrant street vendors. “The expansion will increase property taxes that will raise the rents and ruin small business, making way for corporate chains to move in. It’s a citywide problem.”

Eduardo Giraldo, owner of ABETX International Brokers of Jackson Heights, said, “I’m an insurance broker who deals with these vendors and small business owners, and I’m here to support them. We have to make the community aware that small business is dying all over the city.”

The landlord, Rapp, disagreed with the protesters.

“All I know is I wouldn’t have been able to upgrade these storefronts without the BID. They’re a big help,” he said.

Despite the protest, Taylor said the expansion proceeds while building broad based, overwhelming support for a Jackson Height-Corona Business Improvement District. More than 200 businesses and property owners and more than 1,000 residents signed their support in November.

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