

November 7, 2013

# In Queens, Balking at Change, Even if It's Called Improvement

By JULIE TURKEWITZ

Like a king surveying his empire, Hector Burgos, 74, stood on Roosevelt Avenue at 102nd Street in Queens and spread his arms wide. "This is my corner," he said.

In some ways, he is right. When he came to the United States in 1962, he had \$10 in his pocket. Today he owns four businesses on this corner in New York City: two restaurants and two stores, all offering Ecuadorean products.

When Mr. Burgos first set up shop, Roosevelt Avenue was one of the city's dilapidated backwaters. Homeless people slept in abandoned cars. The street was mostly lined with garages and hardware stores.

Today, it is one of the best-known immigrant corridors in the country, home to hundreds of small businesses, most of them owned by Latinos who have helped transform it into an international fiesta for the senses.

Along the avenue, vendors sell spicy chilaquiles and sweet churros from food carts. Families with strollers crowd major intersections, each one chattering in the Spanish slang of their native country. Men with guttural voices tempt passers-by with illicit identification cards. Cars jam the street, blasting cumbia. And overhead, the No. 7 train rattles its way from Times Square to Flushing and back.

Now, a group led by a local City Council member wants to turn a nearly two-mile stretch of Roosevelt Avenue into a business improvement district, using a model that has transformed some city neighborhoods troubled by grime and crime.

But the plan has divided the community, with some fearing that it would drain the avenue of the eclectic mix of modest businesses that have afforded many immigrants an economic toehold and provided working-class customers affordable places to shop and eat while lending the street its unique and vibrant personality.

If the business improvement district is approved by the City Council, property owners will have to pay a tax in exchange for additional services.

Extra street cleaners would remove graffiti and paint street furniture. Experts would create shopping guides and a website to promote the district. New amenities could include brighter streetlights, additional flowers and garbage cans, maybe even a Wi-Fi corridor.

The district would run from 81st to 104th Street, including portions of 82nd Street and Junction Boulevard, and wind through three neighborhoods: Jackson Heights, Elmhurst and Corona. It would encompass about 880 businesses and four subway stops used by 100,000 riders every weekday.



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The city has 68 business improvement districts, more than any other city in the nation, according to the Department of Small Business Services. The length of the Roosevelt Avenue district would make it one of New York's largest.

Proponents of the plan — tentatively called the [Jackson Heights-Corona Partnership](#) — say that it will bring Roosevelt Avenue into the 21st century, provide a more aesthetically pleasing environment, help reduce [crime](#) and assist immigrant businesses in competing with nearby shopping malls.

“If you walk down the corridor you’ll see that it doesn’t have the same kinds of amenities that other shopping corridors across New York City have,” said Seth Taylor, the executive director of the [82nd Street Partnership](#), a small existing improvement district in Queens. “These are all really important initiatives that can only be done if the small businesses are organized.”

Opponents, however, raise several objections, including the fees that would be imposed. Property owners would pay fees averaging \$900 per commercial lot, per year. (The fee would vary depending on a lot's property value and linear front footage. Property owners typically pass this fee along to their commercial tenants.)

For Leni Juca, 31, an Ecuadorean immigrant who runs a print shop on Roosevelt Avenue, a \$75 or \$100 a month fee would be “a big deal,” money he counts on “to pay my employees, to pay my insurance, to buy supplies, to keep my business alive.”

Others envision a business improvement district transforming a beloved barrio into a valley of chain stores: Sleek amenities, they argue, will attract large corporations that can pay higher rents, pushing out small businesses and homogenizing a significant portion of Queens.

“By bringing all these big American corporations into the area, what are you doing?” said Frank Rafalian, 40, whose father opened Franky Fashion on Roosevelt Avenue in 1991. “You’re killing the authenticity of the area.”

Stroll down Roosevelt Avenue, and visitors will find products available in few other

neighborhoods: morcilla de verde (sausage wrapped in plantain dough); frozen cuyes (guinea pigs the size of small cats) and jeans levantacolas (jeans manufactured in Colombia), to name a few. But it has not always been this way.

The city built Roosevelt Avenue in the early 20th century to make way for the No. 7 train. In the early years, the avenue housed garages for wealthy white residents who lived in Jackson Heights, a planned community where many co-op developments had restrictive covenants that barred blacks, Jews, Catholics and others, according to Jack Eichenbaum, the official historian of Queens.

It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that Latinos began to pour in to New York and open businesses on Roosevelt Avenue, where “the rents were cheaper and it was very accessible to the train,” Mr. Eichenbaum said. The “Latin Quarter,” as he called it, was born.

Not all business owners are opposed to the proposed district. Mr. Burgos, for one, said he welcomed the possibility that instead of paying his employees to scrape pigeon droppings from the sidewalk, “the people from the BID can do it.”

“This neighborhood is for the immigrant,” he said, rejecting the idea that a business improvement district would drastically alter its dynamic. “A change in the culture? I don’t think so.”