



January 12, 2009

Merchants await Yonkers downtown revival

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The Journal News

YONKERS - The arc of Alex Cheblal's dream for a revived Yonkers downtown can be traced by the eatery he's run at Main Street and Riverdale Avenue.

When Cheblal and his wife, Stella Rodriguez Cheblal, opened Bistro Chartreuse in 2004, they sought to serve modern French food priced upward of \$200 per couple. When that didn't work, they came up with Belle Havana, where a couple could eat French-Latino fusion for \$60. After the stock-market plunge in the fall, they introduced a "recession menu" that features a glass of wine, salad and dinner for \$12.95.

And now Cheblal is considering another reincarnation for the business: a gourmet French deli offering quality food that's less expensive than Belle Havana.

Like the owners of a number of other businesses that opened several years ago anticipating a thriving new downtown, Cheblal said his economic troubles preceded the economic downturn and are due to a lack of progress in redeveloping the downtown.

"They have these big ideas, but they don't move the ball fast enough," Cheblal said of Yonkers City Hall.

Few will argue with Cheblal's underlying point: that the new housing built from the waterfront to Riverdale Avenue - more than 800 apartments - has not been enough to easily sustain the independent business owners drawn to the area.

Their hopes rest on the big jackpot represented by the massive redevelopment plan by Struever Fidelco Cappelli: two 25-story residential towers on the waterfront and a massive commercial, entertainment and residential complex near City Hall. And there's more development on the horizon - a plan for 3,752 waterfront apartments along Alexander Street.

But that's not the only problem, said Jacqueline Bouet, owner of Loft Dance & Fitness at 92 Main St., in a space carved from the city's old trolley barn. She said too few of the new residents are showing up as customers at local businesses.

"The people who have relocated are basically working and living in Manhattan and only sleeping here," said Bouet, whose 5,200-square-foot studio opened three years ago this month.

Bouet said only one in 10 of her customers comes from the nearby downtown, with the rest coming from more distant corners of Yonkers and beyond, a much different mix that lured her to the downtown Yonkers. Enticed by the raw brick and steel of the old armory, the nearby Hudson and the area's architecture, Bouet envisioned a more eclectic mix of artists, professionals and residents - a kind of Soho north.

But Bouet is tailoring her business to meet the demands of the market. She's cut her monthly fee to \$85 from \$150, hosted birthday and bat mizvah parties, and dropped, at least for now, jazz-funk and

intermediate hip-hop classes. She hopes her landlord will be willing to renegotiate her rent.

"The vision that all the politicians were talking about, we built that vision and we are waiting for the demographic to get here," Bouet said. "They are not here and we are still struggling."

Not all of the recent arrivals are struggling, however. High-profile, upscale restaurants, such as Zuppa and X2O, have become destinations, attracting customers far beyond the downtown. While X2O's owner, Peter Kelly, said he eagerly hoped for more development to help his Main Street neighbors, the slumping economy was a bigger concern for his restaurant.

"We are dealing somewhat in luxury goods. You don't have to have dinner out, or lunch out," Kelly said, "But for me, I look at it as people are not going to stop going out, not going to stop celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, whatever."

Mayor Phil Amicone, who repeatedly has called for the City Council to speed up review of the SFC project, said construction of that \$1.6 billion project should have begun.

"The development is not happening as fast as any of us would have liked. I certainly share their sentiment about the fact that this major project in downtown is not done," Amicone said last week.

Though the City Council completed its environmental reviews of SFC in the fall, the development has several other legal hurdles before construction can begin. And then there's the question of how easily the development will find financing in the face of the nation's ailing credit institutions.

One of the new downtown's major players, Ken Dearden, said he believed the delays in SFC's approval were due to the City Council's effort to provide an open and inclusive review, which extended the process. Dearden is a principal in MetroPartners, which owns a 170-unit luxury rental at 66 Main St. and 40 apartments and commercial spaces at the old trolley barn, now known as 92 Metro. He's also president of the nonprofit Yonkers Waterfront Downtown Business Improvement District.

"The merchants are struggling, and the best thing the city could do is move swiftly through the approval process that will help bring more shoppers and more people to the downtown," Dearden said.

That review will have little impact on Cheblal's plans. He said he and his wife would decide whether they would turn Belle Havana into a gourmet deli by the end of the month. He acknowledged his bitterness toward the city.

"They called Yonkers 'The City of Vision.' I call it 'The City of Disillusionment,' " he said at Belle Havana Thursday night.

Amicone rejected Cheblal's characterization. He noted that older downtown businesses and newer ones, ranging from pizza parlors to upscale restaurants, were succeeding.

"It sounds to me like maybe he should open his business in another city," Amicone said. "He's already had one restaurant close down and now apparently he is going to have another close. And it's the city's fault?"
