

Expanding A Gaze Beyond Downtown

BY VERONICA LEWIN

Ricardi Calixte, director of the Neighborhood Economic Development for the Queens Economic Development Corp., has a vision for economic opportunities that spread to areas outside of Downtown Jamaica.

Downtown Jamaica is thriving economically, and several plans are in the works to bring even more people to the area. However, the rest of Southeast Queens has not seen that same level of economic success. The South Jamaica resident said a lot of shopping money is going to Long Island and Brooklyn stores when it could be used in the borough. He added areas outside of bustling Downtown Jamaica are ignored to a certain extent, and he is trying to work with stakeholders to bring resources to make the area more enticing to those who do not live in Southeast Queens.

One of Calixte's goals with the QEDC is to establish a new Business Improvement District on Liberty Avenue. According to Calixte, the area has been "resilient" despite tough economic times, but he says even more opportunities are available for the area. Calixte said he hopes implementing a BID would increase awareness of Liberty Avenue and the



Ricardi Calixte

shops it has to offer.

"The corridor is pretty healthy and vibrant and has the qualities that it takes to be a business improvement district," he said.

Establishing a BID takes time and a lot of effort. The process takes two to three years and begins with surveying property owners on their needs and goals. Next, the businesses hold promotions, campaigns and holiday events to attract

shoppers to the area.

One of Calixte's other projects in Southeast Queens involves improving the vacant lot on Farmers Boulevard near Councilman Leroy Comrie's (D-St. Albans) office. The lot has been vacant for years, but has the potential to be the host of many community events. The Farmers Boulevard Health Fair in September brought attention to the vacant lot. Participants had access to free blood pressure screenings, body mass indexing, nutritional information, massage therapy and free produce. Calixte said he hopes to hold other events at the site in the upcoming future.

With its potential growth in mind, Calixte is working with the Farmers Boulevard Development Corp. to improve the vacant site, which will be a two-part project. Calixte said he has received plenty of support from residents in the area thus far. He plans to reach out to the City for additional support to bring projects to fruition.

The Health Fair also addressed one of the other issues Calixte is working to change. "Southeast Queens is one of the areas that has the highest rates of health concerns," he said. Many residents suffer from diabetes, hypertension, and other adverse health outcomes caused by poor

diet, which often is a result of a lack of food options besides fast food and other low-nutritional value meals.

"The residents are not quite happy with their options in terms of getting some fresh food and vegetables," Calixte said. The Pathmark in Laurelton is one of the few options for fresh produce in Southeast Queens.

Calixte said he has a better understanding of what the needs are of South Jamaica, as opposed to a more distant neighborhood where he has to ask around and look up data to figure out how to best serve the community. He said living in the area also helps him know who to talk to when beginning projects.

"We're doing the best we can to see how we can help bring some more vitality to the corridors of Southeast Queens," he said.

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