



Myrtle Avenue Brooklyn Partnership
• Business Improvement District •

2008-2009

annualreport

www.myrtleavenue.org



Serving Myrtle Avenue in Fort Greene, Clinton Hill, & Wallabout

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I. District Background and Review of FY2009 Activities

Neighborhood Needs Assessment

During the 2009 fiscal year, Myrtle Avenue saw its retail vacancy drop from 12% to 8%, but the BID believes that this is likely a temporary drop, as a number of businesses are on the verge of closing due the economic climate. With the slowdown in the real estate market, building sales have slowed down, which has helped to decrease the displacement of longtime retail tenants. Yet a considerable number of retail spaces remain vacant as relatively new property owners continue to pursue asking rents far above what the current market can bear. Eleven new small businesses opened in the district during the past fiscal year, while nine businesses closed. The BID also experienced the unfortunate occurrence of a building collapse and the dismantling of an adjacent building, so the disappearance of two retail spaces is also a factor in the drop in the BID's vacancy rate.

New buildings that have come online continue to have difficulty leasing their retail space, given that these property owners seem to be exclusively seeking to lease to national chains, most of which do not appear interested in Myrtle Avenue at this time. One new building did successfully recruit Walgreens, which opened in December 2008, bringing an important retail anchor to the Fort Greene side of the district. Yet all other newly constructed retail spaces in the district remain vacant. Some of the new residential projects are now being filled with tenants, and three large projects – two of them forty-story towers – are well underway on the western edge of the district. Other planned projects in the same vicinity are unfortunately stalled due to lack of financing. Pratt Institute fortunately proceeded with construction of their planned academic building on the eastern edge of the district, despite the poor economic climate, and occupancy is expected in summer of 2010.

The BID continues its proactive businesses attraction program, in an effort to decrease the vacancy rate and further improve the retail mix. While the vacancy rate continues to fluctuate between 8% and 12% over the last few years, the retail mix continues to improve, with more specialty retailers (florist, animal clinic, pet spa, etc.) coming to the avenue to fill vacant spaces.

The BID-funded storefront improvement program, which provides technical and design assistance to merchants on signage while offering small reimbursement grants, has continued to be very popular, and the prevalence of open-mesh gates and well-designed signage on the avenue is steadily increasing. The young entrepreneur mentor program, in which the BID pays the part-time summer wages of local high school students living in the Whitman, Ingersoll, or Farragut Public Houses that are working at a Myrtle Avenue BID business, had 15 students in the summer of 2008, up from 7 students in 2007.

Review of Accomplishments – Last Year’s Top 5 Goals

1. *Raise the final capital funds needed to complete a major streetscape redesign for the four blocks of Myrtle between Hall Street and Emerson Place, which include a pedestrian plaza, and make tangible steps toward design and construction phases.*

The BID met its goal of raising all necessary capital funds to move forward on the redesign and construction of this section of Myrtle Avenue. Along with the \$3.6 million that had already been raised via a Federal Agency and local elected officials, the BID was selected by DOT as a project in the first round of the NYC Plaza Program, thereby providing the approximately \$2.4 million in additional funds needed to move forward. The \$6 million dollar project will include a pedestrian plaza, and a wider sidewalk and median along two blocks of the project area. The BID is currently waiting on DOT to begin the design phase of the project, which should start in FY10.

2. *Restore the underutilized cobblestone plaza at the Myrtle Avenue and Washington Park entrance to Fort Greene Park in order to make it an active and well-programmed public space.*

The BID met its goal of restoring this Fort Greene Park plaza early in the fiscal year, by leveraging \$25,000 that the Myrtle Avenue Revitalization Project put toward the restoration from its NY Main Street program. The BID put \$5,000 from its operating budget toward reconstruction, and worked with the NYC Parks Department to obtain construction permits and to oversee the entire project through completion. The BID is still working to attract programming and activities to the space.

3. *Launch a new public art initiative in the district that will bring sculpture and paintings to the public realm in an effort to attract new foot traffic and to expand the neighborhood’s reputation for supporting and exhibiting art.*

The BID had a highly successful year in launching its new public art program. The BID started up two separate initiatives, the Myrtle Windows Gallery and the Public Sculpture Program. The Myrtle Windows Gallery launched in ten Myrtle Avenue storefronts located within a 3-block area to exhibit 2-dimensional art outward toward the public sidewalk. Exhibits took place 3 times during the fiscal year, exhibiting over 30 paintings, photographs, and mosaics by local artists. The Public Sculpture Program kicked off with the Tree Hugger Project, with the BID commissioning the temporary installation of four life-size figures made of twigs and branches hugging various trees in the district. The BID worked with both NYCHA and Parks to have the pieces installed on their grounds. After the 11-month installation, the sculptures were brought to Pratt Institute’s campus to become part of their sculpture garden.

4. *Expand on a recent collaboration with the Brooklyn Academy of Music and Afro-Punk LLC to create a new multi-day cultural and musical event that will attract both locals and non-locals to the retail district.*

The BID got started on a 2-year agreement with the Brooklyn Academy of Music to collaborate on the Brooklyn Urban Arts Market, an open-air music performance stage and DIY arts market on Myrtle Avenue on four Sundays in the summer and fall. The event was a moderate success, but a considerable amount of work and at times, a difficult collaboration given the different sizes and cultures of the two organizations. Plans to adjust and improve the events during the 2nd year in order to increase turnout and lower costs have been discussed. After the 2nd year, we will decide whether or not to continue the partnership and the events themselves.

5. *Collect data for an additional 30% of all commercial leases in the district (to have a total of 60% of lease data) in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of current trends and to help accurately guide the expectations of both property owners and prospective retail tenants.*

Collecting comprehensive lease data for retail space in the district continues to be difficult. While the BID did collect data on more leases, we did not reach our ambitious goal of 60%. At the end of FY09, the BID had collected data on 39% of the retail leases in the district, allowing the BID to offer more accurate advice to property owners and tenants on average and median rents on the commercial corridor.

II. Looking Ahead: Fiscal Year 2010 Goals

Top 5 Goals for the Coming Year

1. *Begin and make tangible progress with the design phase of the \$6 million streetscape reconstruction of the four blocks of Myrtle between Hall Street and Emerson Place, which includes a pedestrian plaza. Assemble a 15-person Plaza Advisory Committee, made up of local stakeholders, to advise the BID on the plaza's design and to help facilitate broader community participation.*
2. *Fabricate and install prototypes for three custom-designed street furniture elements, gather additional feedback on the designs, and implement plan for installing these items within the district.*
3. *Launch the second phase of MARP's 'Home Grown & Locally Owned' branding campaign, featuring 19 new campaign images, while expanding the campaign's reach via advertising placement.*
4. *Organize and throw the BID's first multi-day, multi-block street closure event, via DOT's pedestrian streets program, in an effort to attract a critical mass of local residents to Myrtle Avenue.*
5. *Plant 15 new street trees on the avenue, while creating a tree pit planting scheme for those trees that have new tree pit guards installed during the year.*

These five goals that the BID has set for FY10 will help to advance three priority areas that the board and staff have established for the short- and medium-term: improving the avenue's built infrastructure and public space, thereby making the retail district a place where shoppers are more likely to linger; drawing additional foot traffic through positive branding of the retail corridor and successful public events; and further beautifying the avenue via tree plantings and horticulture. Goals 1, 2, and 5, will likely take the entire fiscal year to complete. Goals 3 and 4 will primarily happen in the fall of 2009. All five goals have project timelines and interim goals, as well as metrics in place to help measure project success.

III. Contracts

See attached spreadsheet.

IV. Organizational Information

The BID shares staff with the Myrtle Avenue Revitalization Project LDC (MARP), the not-for-profit local development corporation that manages the BID's operations and programs. MARP's four full-time staff members are half-time employees of MARP and half-time employees of the BID, with 50% of staff compensation paid by each organization. These full-time employees are:

Michael Blaise Backer, Executive Director

Meredith Phillips Almeida, Director of Community Development

Jennifer Stokes, Program Manager for Business Assistance

Sarah Farwell, Program Manager for Preservation & Streetscape Initiatives

The BID also employs three part-time employees, Raome Quinones as Streetscape Inspector (11 hours/week), Joanna Reynolds (25 hours/week) as Assistant on Special Projects, and Dan DeSoto, a graphic designer (14 hours/week). All staff reports directly to the Executive Director.