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# Everything's Great When You're Downtown

By *Alyson Grala*

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Filipek and Fore

GLASSBORO, NJ-The downtown retail district here is undergoing a major \$300-million makeover, which hopes to attract as many as 125 new retail stores and inject around \$225 million annually into the local economy. Rowan Boulevard is the heart of Glassboro's downtown revitalization project, which will form a 26-acre, 100-foot wide corridor and feature broad tree-lined sidewalks, stores, restaurants, mixed-use buildings, a new student housing campus, a hotel-conference center, pedestrian plazas and a town square.

Construction of the new student housing is already underway at one end of the boulevard, with plans for its completion before the fall 2009 semester. Building of the roadway began in March, and several key commercial buildings will begin going up over the next few months, including the hotel/conference center by year's end.

While Rowan Boulevard itself contains 26 acres, the entire revitalization project will encompass 81 acres and several neighborhoods bordering Glassboro's downtown. Overall, the project is expected to generate \$1.2 million in new annual property taxes and create more than 700 new permanent jobs.

"We're transforming the municipality into the quintessential college town, creating a direct link with a yet untapped retail market available from more than 12,500 students and staff at Rowan University," says Greg Filipek, a principal with Sora Holdings, the designated master redeveloper of Glassboro's downtown revitalization. "We're creating a downtown that works in today's world. We're not just replacing old buildings; we're recreating a downtown that is a community," he tells GlobeSt.com.

Essential to the project is the fact that it has been strategically developed to reflect the best, sustainable interests of Glassboro's business community. To that end, Glassboro retained the JGSC Group of Merchantville to conduct a comprehensive Community Insights study of Glassboro's downtown to analyze the market and determine specific, viable strategies to revitalize its older retail districts and stimulate economic growth.

The key finding of the study was that there is a consumer base that makes the new businesses sustainable. The study's conclusions revealed that student discretionary spending was \$18.3 million annually, of which only 18% was being captured by Glassboro's downtown businesses. In addition to the students, the study's findings found that overall consumer demand exceeded Glassboro's retail supply by more than \$425 million annually, a figure that grows around 7% per year.

A total of 114 types of retail operations were analyzed in the study, encompassing everything from apparel, accessories, arts/entertainment, automotive and beauty and personal care, to computers, F&B and restaurants, health/medical, home improvement and furnishings, professional services, recreation and sports facilities and retail specialties.

"Rowan Boulevard's mix of uses forms distinct, walkable areas, creating a live-work-play environment that minimizes vehicular traffic and encourages mutual use of the space by office workers, shoppers, residents, students and visitors," says Tom Fore, Sora Holdings' other principal partner.

Despite the faltering national economic climate, the Glassboro revitalization is forging ahead on schedule. All of the land for Rowan Boulevard has been acquired without the use of eminent domain. The \$300-million project is being entirely privately funded through Sora Holdings, excluding \$3.1 million in NJDOT and Federal funds covering roadway construction.

Fore tells GlobeSt.com that there is approximately \$70 million committed to construction now underway, with many additional project components in various stages of planning and design for which funding has been allocated.

Along with Rowan Boulevard, several Glassboro neighborhoods will benefit from new housing, office and retail space. The Rowan Boulevard District will host a new hotel/conference center, student housing and retail stores and restaurants with residential and office space above.

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In the fall of 2009, the start of construction is planned for a 107-room Holiday Inn Express & Suites and conference center, which will offer banquet facilities for 300 guests. There will also be a 5,000-square-foot restaurant located adjacent to the hotel. Barnes & Noble, which is scheduled to be under construction in July, will serve as one of the anchors, with a 36,000-square-foot facility for both the university and public, complete with a 6,000 square foot Starbucks Café. Meanwhile, the Let's Dance Studio is planning a facility and recently received its planning board clearances, with construction now getting underway.

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In addition, construction is underway on four-story, apartment-style housing to accommodate 884 students, providing immediate access to both downtown and Rowan's campus. Many of the buildings feature galleries for use in two-story restaurant and retail store formats. For its part, Rowan University is building additional student housing just across Mullica Hill Road/Route 322, which will offer another 700 to 800 beds.

Five, four-story mixed-use buildings with 40,000 square feet of office space, 185,000 square feet of retail space and 307,000 square feet of residential space are also being planned, with the project calling for the construction of 340 residential condominiums above retail stores and 46 upscale town homes.

At its end, the boulevard will wrap around a new 1.5-acre Town Square designed to become a gathering place for community events and celebrations, including a built-in park-wide sound and lighting system to facilitate as many as 75 outdoor concerts and shows throughout the year. Beyond the park, the boulevard will reach its eastern end at the foot of a new, classically designed public library.

As for other revitalization efforts, Centre St. is set for conversion into an 18,000-square-foot pedestrian promenade, while Glassboro's West High Street district will be transformed into a neighborhood retail corridor. The district includes Summit Village, a new 51-townhouse.

Glassboro's entertainment district is also getting an upgrade and will feature a cluster of mixed-use buildings with entertainment-related retail at grade and office uses on the upper floors. Plans call for a performing arts center with a 500 to 800-seat live performance theater, along with smaller black box theaters and rehearsal/meeting rooms, as well as entertainment-related businesses.

Upgrades to Glassboro's arts district are also on tap, Fore says. The plan is to over-build additional floors above some of the older one-story buildings in this district to provide additional residential and office space. The ground floor properties are expected to be artist studios, art galleries, jewelry stores, boutiques and other specialty retail uses.

Tying the project together, a feasibility study is underway to investigate establishing a trolley system to loop throughout downtown and link with parking areas, the university and the new train station, connecting the various neighborhoods and promoting pedestrian circulation.

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