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Glassboro dreams big for its downtown despite downturn

Philadelphia Business Journal - by [Athena D. Merritt](#) Staff Writer

GLASSBORO — An ambitious plan to revitalize the area's downtown is moving forward despite the economic downturn, and may even finish ahead of schedule, according to a developer.

The entire project by buildout will encompass 81 acres and blend new businesses, residences, office and entertainment venues. The first leg of it, a \$300 million makeover of the Rowan Boulevard corridor that spans 26 acres, is already under way.

In embarking on the project, the borough hopes to recapture the hundreds of millions its residents are estimated to be spending elsewhere each year. Efforts are being guided by a comprehensive study by Merchantville-based JGSC Group, which the borough retained to analyze and develop a strategy to stimulate the downtown's economy.

Although the project is expected to take 10 years to complete, signs suggest it may be finished within five or six years, said Greg Filipek, principal partner of **Sora Holdings**, the master redeveloper of the project.

"In reality, there's been so much interest and so much excitement as we have broken ground on Rowan Boulevard, we now see pieces of the High Street stuff in downtown taking hold and moving along," Filipek said of neighborhoods bordering the downtown that are targeted as part of the plans.

The project is on track despite the rocky economy, Filipek said.

"The strength of this project is it's a good project regardless of bad economic times," he said.

All of the funding for the project, except for the roadway construction, will be funded by private dollars, including a \$1 million grant from **Rowan University**. Already, private developers have committed \$70 million to various components of the project.

The project includes the revitalization of the entire downtown, as well as several neighborhoods that border it. Key will be Rowan Boulevard, a corridor that stretches from Rowan University's campus to the downtown. Once madeover, it is expected to attract up to 125 new retail stores and more than a dozen restaurants capable of generating \$1.2 million in new property taxes annually and more than 400 new jobs.

"The key plan was to make the project bigger than originally planned," said Joseph Getz, a principal partner of JGSC. "We needed to be big enough to attract all of that spending that was available."

A number of developments are under way.

Holiday Inn Express & Suites is scheduled to break ground in March on a 107-room hotel and conference center, which will have a 5,000-square-foot restaurant adjacent to it in the Rowan Boulevard district.

A \$60 million student housing project that will house 884 students in apartment-style accommodations is under way behind the planned hotel.

Barnes & Noble will serve as an anchor to the area, with a 36,000-square-foot bookstore that will include a 6,000-square-foot Starbucks.

Saladworks is also opening a store.

Plans also call for turning the East High Street area (from Academy Street to Route 47/Delsea Drive) into an entertainment district with a performing arts center, theater operations and possibly a three- or four-screen movie theater, Filipek said.

The West High Street district, immediately south of Rowan Boulevard, has been designated as a retail area which will offer neighborhood services for everyday needs, such as a post office, barber shop, beauty salon, bakery, insurance agency, pharmacy and grocery store.

A new Carnegie-style library is planned at the end of College Avenue, while Centre Street will be closed from College to High and converted into an 18,000-square-foot public piazza that will feature outdoor dining, lunch-hour entertainment and kiosks.

The revitalization is intended to capture \$225 million of an estimated \$425 million in total discretionary spending that is now leaking out of the municipality, according to the study by JGSC.

The study found that the 346,000 residents within a 10-mile radius of Glassboro, the state's fastest-growing region, spend \$425 million elsewhere — an amount that grows about 7 percent each year. In addition, students at Rowan University were spending \$18.3 million annually, of which only 18 percent landed in the downtown business district.

Retail has failed to keep pace with residential growth in the area, Filipek said. Restaurants are scattered, offering no central location. Entertainment is scarce, with the nearest multiplex movie theater several miles away, and although there are an abundance of stores they tend to all be of the same lot, such as pharmacies, Getz said.

In its study, JGSC asked more than 3,300 residents, shoppers and students what they desire in the area. Full-service restaurants, taverns and pubs, bookstores, clothing retailers, jewelry stores and home furnishing and décor were all in demand.

In crafting the revitalization project, planners combined the feedback with public outreach meetings, interviews with local businesses, organizations and public officials and economic data measuring retail and other demand for the area.

“We found there was enough unmet retail demand to sustain almost 30 restaurants,” Getz said. “There was so much unmet demand we could actually support more restaurants than we would even need to put down there.”

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