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A Neighbor Joins the Revival of Jamaica Avenue

By SANA SIWOLOP

The Dermot Company, a real estate developer in Manhattan, often invests in historic buildings and emerging neighborhoods. Three years ago, it took on both challenges when its development proposal to remake the old Queens Family Court building in downtown Jamaica was accepted by the New York City Economic Development Corporation.

There, the company had to deal with an empty 75,000-square-foot four-story municipal building, with an ornate Italian Renaissance-style facade the development corporation wanted to keep intact, but which was sloppily renovated inside and paired with a nondescript annex building in 1966.

Along with a parking lot, the two buildings sat on a two-acre site at Parsons Boulevard and 89th Avenue, two blocks from Jamaica Avenue.

In 2005, a long-unfolding revival was already under way on Jamaica Avenue, but the street, a busy shopping district, was still home to a large number of discount stores and fast-food chains.

Dermot planned to keep the front of the courthouse and its facade, demolish the annex building and turn the rest of the site into a large mixed-use project that would be attractive to higher-quality retailers and offer low- and middle-income and market-rate housing. The company now plans to offer 346 units of housing.

At the time of its bid, market-rate housing was still rare in Jamaica, but the company was banking on the success of the Opal, an upscale housing project it had recently completed in Kew Gardens Hills, about a mile and a half away.

Jamaica is a busy transportation hub and a major center for government buildings, and now the courthouse project looks especially timely.

Local officials say residential development in the area began picking up after a terminal for the AirTrain to Kennedy International Airport opened in 2003, making the area more attractive to airport workers and travelers. The interest rose even more after the 2005 opening, a few blocks from the courthouse project, of York-



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Two blocks from Jamaica Avenue, above, the Queens Family Court building, top, is being redeveloped.

side Towers on 161st Street, which was the first market-rate rental housing to come to the area in 30 years.

Last fall, the City Council approved a huge rezoning plan that limited development in certain areas of Jamaica but encouraged higher and denser development in others, like the area around the AirTrain transit hub.

On Jamaica Avenue, change is continuing as well. The street is scheduled to become home to a 400-seat performing arts center in the spring, and lately a growing number of banks and drug stores have joined the ranks of

the mostly local businesses, which sell items like African clothing and beauty supplies.

In 2002, a large retail center, Jamaica Center, brought a 15-screen multiplex to the avenue, as well as stores like Gap and Old Navy. Last year, meanwhile, there was the much-heralded arrival of a 47,000-square-foot Marshalls store and a Home Depot.

Still, local officials say downtown Jamaica can still use higher-quality retailers, as well as a supermarket, sit-down restaurants, a large electronics retailer and perhaps even a small department store.

"There are national retailers here, but not enough," said F. Carlisle Towery, president of the Greater Jamaica Development Corporation, a local nonprofit group. "We have plenty of moms-and-pops, but we really need quality retail chains."

Dermot hopes its courthouse project, where development is already under way and where the costs are expected to reach \$194 million, will offer the large modern retail space that many national retailers find hard to come by locally. It would also provide a more affordable home for retailers that want to be on a major road that leads to the downtown area but cannot afford Jamaica Avenue, where some rents lately have reached \$150 a square foot. The company plans to ask for rents of \$40 to \$100 a square foot.

Plans call for adding a 12-story residential tower to the back of the courthouse building, with an entrance along 89th Avenue.

Shoppers, meanwhile, would enter the building through the

current courthouse entrance, where a large plaza inside would be flanked by community space, as well as two large retail "boxes" on both sides of the plaza. The building would offer 55,000 square feet of retail space on three floors.

Alex Adams, the Dermot executive who is overseeing the project, said his company would like a mix of local and national retailers at the site, as well as two sit-down restaurants, which might inject more life into downtown Jamaica at night. "We think the area is underserved in certain key areas," he said.

The project is also expected eventually to offer, in an underground garage, some 500 parking spots, "a rarity in Jamaica," said Kenneth Hochhauser, a senior managing director at Newmark Knight Frank Retail, the real estate company that is marketing retail space at the site.

"The parking here will allow us to draw regional tenants like a Trader Joe's, Food Emporium, Red Lobster or Outback Steakhouse," he said, citing those companies as examples.

Real estate professionals say the downtown area is already reaping benefits from the new Home Depot and Marshalls. Both, they say, are in an area that used to have much less retail activity and are within 10 blocks of the courthouse project.

"This is a solid eastern bookend to the downtown area that was not there before," said Frank Zuckerbrot, a partner at Sholom & Zuckerbrot Realty in Long Island City.

Howard Dolch, an executive vice president at the Lansco Corporation, which is marketing 28,500 square feet of retail space next to the new Marshalls store, said: "This street is changing. We think we now have a much broader audience of tenants to choose from."

Still, efforts are continuing to draw even more retailers. Last fall, the city's economic development corporation began looking for a buyer for an old garage on 168th Street off Jamaica Avenue. The agency would like to see it remade into a mixed-use project combining housing with at least 35,000 square feet of retail space, which would also include space for a sit-down restaurant.