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Fifth Avenue business owners look to revitalize downtown Naples

By Laura Layden
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Fifth Avenue South property owners are moving ahead with plans to spiff up their street.

With a bad economy and more competition from newer retail hot-spots in Southwest Florida, businesses are hurting along the downtown street in the heart of Naples.

So property owners are paying for a consultant to come in and reevaluate the street and develop a merchandising plan.

“We are talking about millions of square feet of commercial space that didn’t exist 10 years ago. We are having now to adjust to all the competition, including Mercato and others,” said Jim Smith, whose family owns three properties on Fifth Avenue.

The Mercato off U.S. 41 near Vanderbilt Beach Road in North Naples continues to bring in new shops, restaurants and other businesses — both local and national. There’s also more competition in south Lee County from the massive Coconut Point and Gulf Coast Town Center malls that opened a few years ago.

With the new planning study the hope is to identify the types of businesses that will do well on Fifth Avenue over the next five years. Property owners would go after those businesses to help fill empty spots and redefine the street to bring more people downtown.

“The population has been moving north, as all communities seem to do,” said Smith, who is semi-retired from RE/Quest, a marketing, research, development and property appraisal company in downtown Naples.

As part of his analysis, the consultant will also look at developing a marketable brand for Fifth Avenue.

Property owners have hired Gibbs Planning Group of Birmingham, Mich., for the job. The company’s president, Robert J. Gibbs, will do the study. His company has conducted similar research for historic Charleston, Old Town Alexandria and Disney properties. Other clients include General Motors, Simon Properties — the owners of Coconut Point mall in Estero — and the cities of Atlanta and Chicago.

Gibbs was a marketing consultant on the original redevelopment plan unveiled for Fifth Avenue South in 1993. He’s now doing work around the world and recently returned from Australia, Smith noted.

“We expect him to come in here and tell us exactly what we should be doing and what the market is and what is sustainable on Fifth Avenue,” Smith said.

Gibbs is coming to Naples next week. He’ll be in town Sept. 9-11 and several meetings are scheduled with downtown property owners.

The Greater Naples Chamber of Commerce plans a meeting for Thursday, Sept. 10, where Gibbs will make a presentation on new retail trends. It’s open to the business community and will be held at the Sugden Theatre on Fifth Avenue South at 8 a.m.

A study is already underway to determine just how much space is vacant on the street.

“I can tell you just by driving down the street there’s about a 20 percent vacancy in retail,” Smith said. “I haven’t seen that in seven or eight years.”

He remembers a time not so long ago when the buildings were 100 percent occupied and there was a waiting list of businesses wanting to move to the street.

"There was hardly ever a vacancy," he said.

He's seen a lot of changes on the street over the years. Now 64, he remembers what it looked like when he was a boy and his parents were running a grocery store in the 1940s. Naples was a sleepy town back then.

He said marketing the downtown street is so difficult now because there are 28 different property owners with different ideas representing more than 40 buildings.

"At the Mercato, which has a single owner, or the mall, they can make their decisions quickly and put them into effect," Smith said.

"We've got to somehow get ourselves more unified so we can make decisions quickly and compete with what's out there."

In addition to the study by Gibbs, property owners are in discussions with Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co. to bring its lead architect, Andres Duany, back to Naples to weigh in on changes to the street. Duany led the revitalization of Fifth Avenue South in 1993. He did a follow-up study in 2004.

"He hasn't committed at this point. But we have already given him the scope of work we would like him to do," said Lou Vlasho, a property owner on the street and a vice president of the company that runs Vergina, an Italian eatery on Fifth Avenue.

Property owners want Duany to review the work done by Gibbs, to look at plans for lighting and landscaping that have not been implemented, to recommend ways of marketing the street and to consider branding proposals. They also want him to take a look at ways to organize the property owners, make recommendations about parking, especially at the west end of the street, and address the loss of hundreds of hotel and other short-term rentals for visitors downtown, which became condominiums or were wiped out by commercial development.

Vlasho, chairman of the Naples Community Redevelopment Agency advisory board, said the effort for a new planning study of the street began in the spring.

Much has changed since Duany was here more than a decade ago. There have been a lot of changes just since his last visit some five years ago.

"It's time for us to look at where we are and see where we need to be going," Vlasho said. "We need direction."

He said property owners don't want to just sit back and wait for the economy to improve.

"Everyone is suffering," Vlasho said. "It is difficult. Restaurants and retailers of all types are having difficult times." He said most property owners have agreed to put in money for the retail market study by Gibbs. His work probably won't be done for a couple of months.

"Fifth Avenue is the crown jewel of Southwest Florida," Vlasho said. "We just need to be careful that it doesn't get tarnished. It needs a little bit of polishing."