

## **Consultant: Fifth Avenue South could benefit from high-end chain stores**

By Elizabeth Kellar

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NAPLES — Some things don't change. For example, many men don't like to go shopping.

"As far as we can tell, men haven't shopped for 4,000 years," joked Robert J. Gibbs, president of Gibbs Planning Group, during a Thursday morning presentation to Fifth Avenue South about 50 business owners.

But some things do change, and one of them might be the look and feel of Naples' celebrated main street.

Fifth Avenue South property owners hired Gibbs' group to conduct a study about how to energize their area, which is struggling in the sluggish economy and in the face of increased local competition. The study results are expected to be released in late September.

Thursday's meeting gave business owners a chance to hear some general information about revitalization, including what works and what doesn't.

What doesn't work, Gibbs counseled, is offering products that consumers don't want to buy. The average consumer truly wants to patronize independent, locally owned stores, he said, but there's an ease and comfort associated with large chain stores that acts like a gravitational pull for many shoppers.

That's true of tourists, too. There's a myth that vacationers want to buy different brands while they're traveling, but the research proves otherwise.

Also, tourists "up-shop," Gibbs said. "They're rewarding themselves for working hard."

Gibbs noted how Charleston, S.C., has taken an approach that it will allow a variety of stores, including in-demand brands such as Apple and Louis Vuitton, into its historic shopping district — stores that are often relegated to malls. The principle is regarded as controversial, he said, because historic districts don't like the idea of having large chain stores.

But those popular stores benefit all the area's vendors, because they draw dollars.

The thought of making a merchant mix on Fifth Avenue South was appealing to Christine Cammas, owner of Femmes Je Vous Aime, a Fifth Avenue lingerie, sportswear and swimwear shop, and presentation attendee. She recalled shopping on Paris' famed Champs-Elysees, which is home to many large, famous brand name stores.

Also, she hopes there could be a way to attract more locals to the street. There's a perception that Fifth Avenue is expensive, but "we need to change that idea," she said.

Beth Ressler, owner of Wind in the Willows, a women's clothing and gift shop on Fifth Avenue, said she was pleased to hear Gibbs' report that the downtown shopping district is held in high national esteem.

While there's also a perception that Naples is in a recession, Gibbs said, he believes that the area's downturn will be shorter than average.

Ressler was also interested to learn that a significant percentage of shoppers like to shop later in the evening.

"I feel like Bob Gibbs is the shot in the arm that Fifth Avenue needs," Ressler said.

E-mail Elizabeth Kellar at [liz@elizabethkellar.com](mailto:liz@elizabethkellar.com).