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WHEDco Works On Southern Boulevard Retail Revival

By Bill Weisbrod

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The area around Southern Boulevard has been growing solidly in terms of population over the past several years, but the main retail strip, Southern Boulevard itself? Not so much.

However, Bronx non-profit WHEDco believe the empty storefronts underneath the street's elevated train line between East 174th Street and Westchester Avenue represent opportunity.

The organization is leading an initiative that seeks to create a thriving retail industry on Southern Boulevard. In May, WHEDco helped Southern Boulevard businesspeople form a merchant's association and on Wednesday, June 22, it organized a retail tour for brokers and property owners to display the spaces to prospective retail tenants.

Kerry McLean is WHEDCo's director of community development and is overseeing the Southern Boulevard business development push.

"We opened an office nearby on Intervale Avenue in 2009," McLean said. "And we looked at Southern Boulevard as a main commercial strip, because of the population growth and the trains stop here."

WHEDco has conducted and published extensive research on the demographics in the area within a mile of the stretch of Southern Boulevard it is trying to promote. It has compiled data on population levels, income, spending habits and property values.

The area's population grew from 216,022 in 2000 to 232,514 in 2010. Average household income grew from \$28,354, to \$35,877 during the same span. All of the research is intended to attract businesses to Southern Boulevard.

The Southern Boulevard economic development push, which has been going on for about a year, is also being funded by \$25,000 from the New York City Department of Small Business Services.

Jebel Ceesay, a 48-year-old native of Gambia and owner of JB Collection Clothing on 1085 Southern Boulevard, was recently elected as the first president of the Southern Boulevard Merchant Association.

His first priority is to establish cohesiveness between his neighboring merchants and promote the idea that more business on the strip will help them all.

"We need more ladies clothing stores, more restaurants," Ceesay said. "There are a lot of dollars that are going out of the neighborhood."

Ceesay sells jeans, shorts, polo shirts, sneakers and hats out of his shop. He said that when he first set up his business in the United States in 2005, he opened a women's clothing store, but passersby kept asking for jeans and sneakers.

Both Ceesay and WHEDco have some public relations work to do as well. He believes there is an outdated perception that the area is dangerous.

"The last two or three years it's been totally different," Ceesay said. "Crime is not like before and you have no idea how many people

are coming into the area. They shop, but out of the area. We need to tell people that Southern Boulevard is O.K.”

Eddie Torres has been working to try to lease out a storefront on the ground floor of a Southern Boulevard apartment building owned by his family. They have some tenants, such as a hair salon, but have been unable to find a business to move into one of the larger spaces and are using it as a party rental space in the meantime.

“I’d like to see a Dunkin Donuts, a Subway, or even a doctor’s office here. Anything could do well,” Torres said. “There are so many rental buildings being put up, this whole area can become two to three miles of just shopping.”