

## Commercial Property/Grand Central and 34th Street Partnerships

# BIDs Bid to Prettify the Stores in Their Districts

They consult on interior design and seek to bar solid gates.

By JOHN HOLUSHA

“THREE and a half years ago, this place looked like an old gin mill,” said Tom Ryan, an owner of Annie Moore’s, an eating and drinking establishment in the shadow of Grand Central Terminal at 50 East 43d Street.

Today, with an attractive polished wood front and inviting double doors, the restaurant is attracting crowds for lunch and dinner, as well as post-theater visitors wanting a bite to eat or a drink before heading home to the suburbs.

The makeover was done in consultation with the local business improvement district, the Grand Central Partnership. In addition to the typical BID undertakings — sweeping the sidewalks and promoting safety with security guard patrols — Grand Central and its sister 34th Street Partnership are trying to improve the look and feel of retail operations in the districts.

Although the 39 districts in the city have been successful in improving the quality of life in many areas, the Giuliani administration was reported last week to be planning to impose rules that would require them to clear most actions with the city’s Department of Business Services.

The midtown BIDs, both headed by Daniel A. Biederman, have warred against illegal signs and sidewalk canopies that tend to break up vistas on an important tourist street like 34th. Now they are taking on the solid-metal roll-down gates merchants use after hours to protect their display windows, and are extending consulting services to improve store interiors.

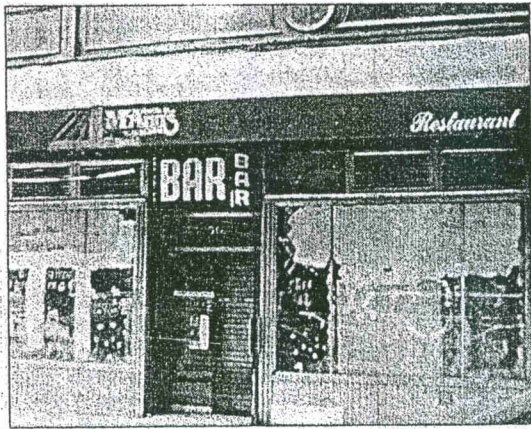
The BIDs’ executives say the consulting focuses on the hundreds of small stores among the approximately 1,400 retail outlets in the two districts.

“Banana Republic does not need any help from us when it opens a store,” said Dan Pisark, director of retail improvement for the districts. “But smaller store owners do not have the extensive resources of a big national company.”

One service provides a statistical data base on pedestrian traffic for merchants thinking of locating in the districts. “The first thing a retailer wants to know is how many people are going to be walking past my store on weekday afternoons or Saturday mornings,” said Mr. Pisark. “So we actually go out and count. We’ve found that these are some of the busiest sidewalks in New York, with as many as 10,000 people an hour passing by the northwest corner of Seventh Avenue and 34th Street.”

Lately the BIDs have been offering another program. It’s called Mike Feder. Actually, it is formally called the Savvy Stores program, but its principal component is Mr. Feder, a retired Macy’s executive with 30 years of experience in merchandising, operations and service.

Mr. Feder’s consulting is available free to retailers in the districts, whose landlords pay BID assessments in addition to their city taxes to provide the security, cleaning and other services. In the Grand Central district the assessment is 15.4 cents per



Photographs by Norman Mintz

Annie Moore’s before and after makeover helped by Grand Central Partnership, led by Daniel Biederman, who also heads 34th St. agency.

square foot of property annually, while in the 34th Street district it is 22.4 cents.

“Before making any suggestions, I like to chat with retailers,” Mr. Feder said. “I ask them how they see their business, what the obstacles and problems are, what is the profile of their customers.”

NOT all retailers are eager to be critiqued. Some say that if they are still in business they must be doing something right. “Some feel threatened by the partnership coming in and promoting change,” Mr. Pisark said.

Once he feels he has gained the confidence of a retailer, Mr. Feder said, he will make suggestions about the mix of merchandise, how it is presented and the general environment of the store. “A lot of these people are very price oriented,” Mr. Feder said. “What I try to inject is that price is not the only thing and that they have to offer more than price.”

He said he talks about developing a friendly environment and such matters as rearranging displays so customers have easy access to the back of the store. Window displays, the face of any store, get special attention.

“A store only has a few seconds to get a customer’s attention, so windows are important,” Mr. Feder said. In general, he said, less is more. A few products well displayed have more pulling power than a window stuffed with a sample of everything in the store. And displays should be changed regularly.

“The frequent passer-by — your core customer — will be more likely to stop in front of a fresh window,” Mr. Feder wrote in the BID’s newsletter, Shop Talk. “A window that tells a story that is timely, amusing or colorful is more likely than a tired one to motivate the occasional shopper to enter the store.”

One merchant pleased with Mr. Feder’s advice is Carol Konop, who operates the Shirt Store, on 44th Street between Madison and Vanderbilt Avenues. “We are basically doing a face-lift of the interior with his help,” Ms. Konop said. “It is too costly to use a designer, so my staff and I do the displays.” She said that with 863 square feet on one floor to stock inventory, do custom

tailoring and sell, the efficient use of space is critical.

Mr. Biederman said that the objective of eliminating garish, and often illegal, signs and canopies was to improve the look of the shopping district as a whole. “We are learning from the shopping malls,” he said, where property owners have strict control of signs and the look of stores. “We have drawn some lessons on the management of common areas.”

Management of common areas, which in Manhattan means the city’s streets, has been a traditional BID activity. In addition to security and sweeping, some districts have replaced utilitarian wire city trash baskets with more attractive containers. Street lighting has been changed, and messy collections of newspaper vending boxes have been replaced by larger units.

But getting involved in store operations is breaking new ground, the BID officials say. “At first the objective was to make midtown more attractive by upgrading storefronts and facades,” said Norman Mintz, chief designer for the two BIDs. “Now we are inside working on the image and merchandising of stores. Most BIDs do not do that.”

ONE current goal is to do away with solid metal roll-down doors on stores. As with the sign program, the BIDs are prepared to use both the carrot and the stick. They offered to take down canopies free of charge and to design a legal sign for a store. But if a merchant did not comply, BID officials reported offenders to city authorities for enforcement.

Similarly, BID officials are willing to provide a merchant with financial help to remove a solid gate, or replace it with a mesh one. At the same time, two City Council members, Thomas K. Duane, a Democrat, and Andrew S. Eristoff, a Republican, both of Manhattan, have introduced legislation that would ban solid gates on 34th and 42d Streets. A hearing on the proposal, which would require mesh gates to be at least 75 percent open space, has not been scheduled.

As with the sign campaign, BID officials said the objective was to open the districts up and make the streets better lit and more attractive for after-hours strollers.

“Solid doors hurt sales, and they are there



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

for fear of something that does not happen anymore,” Mr. Pisark said. “There are very few glass breaks today.”

He said that with no gates or mesh gates, light from stores would spill onto the streets and allow tourists and residents who do not rush to the suburbs each evening a chance to window-shop. In addition, the solid gates are a natural canvas for graffiti, which many visitors associate with urban danger and decay, officials said.

The BIDs are also offering a seminar series later this month aimed at helping small-store operators improve their financial performance. It will be held at the Science, Industry and Business Library, in the building that once housed the B. Altman department store, at Madison Avenue and 34th Street.

“A lot of small stores are behind on hiring techniques and hire without doing background checks,” said Mr. Pisark. “We tell them to do the checks to avoid hiring problems.”