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Patchogue, Farmingdale, Westbury downtown revitalizations: A look back



Credit: Kathy Kmonicek; John Paraskevas; Rick Kopstein; Newsday/Alejandra Villa Loarca

By **Arlene Gross** [Special to Newsday](#) Updated April 17, 2024

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Donald Felice remembers when everyone in Patchogue shopped at local stores and stopped at Doukas's ice cream parlor, which later became Johnny's Luncheonette.

"You'd never shop anywhere else. You'd come to Patchogue," said Felice, 79, a lifelong resident.

But in the '60s, as malls and shopping centers opened nearby, the life drained out of downtown, which became derelict and disused for decades.

Then, in the mid-2000s, developers and restaurateurs bet on Patchogue, hoping their investments would benefit the greater community.

Patchogue is one of several Long Island villages that have undergone a renaissance, after enduring stifling stretches of uninviting vacant storefronts and rundown buildings along their main drags. Elected officials from three communities looked back at how their downtowns turned around, some of the challenges they faced and what they would do differently.

Patchogue



Main Street in Patchogue in 1981 and 2019. Credit: J. Michael Dombrowski; Daniel Brennan

THE DOWNTURN

Mayor Paul Pontieri recalled a once-thriving downtown that suffered after South Shore and Smith Haven malls opened in 1963 and 1969, respectively.

"Malls became the place to go, not downtowns anymore," said Pontieri.

"What happened was the stores on Main Street, they all went out of business," said Felice's daughter, Heather Felice, 53, a real estate agent who also lives in Patchogue. "So, the town in the late-'80s became a ghost town."

That extended to 2004, when Pontieri was elected.

"When I took over as mayor, there was nothing going on on Main Street," he said.

TURNING POINT



Seacrest Village builder Donald Felice, left, and Patchogue Mayor Paul Pontieri wanted to revive the village they knew from decades earlier. Credit: Newsday/J. Conrad Williams Jr.

I wanted to bring Patchogue to the way it was when I was a kid.

— Donald Felice

In 2005, Tritec Real Estate was invited to build along the intersection of Ocean Avenue and Main Street, which would become New Village at Patchogue. About 50% of Main Street was vacant then, but Pontieri philosophized that businesses would come after development, not before.

"You really had to make downtown vibrant," Pontieri said.

Donald Felice was working as a mechanic on South Ocean Ave and Academy Street, when the next door neighbor, who'd planned to build 30 condos on the site, went out of business after building four units. Felice bought the property

and in 2006, completed Seacrest Village, comprising 44 one-bedroom rental units.

"It was right next door to my gas station; I could keep an eye on it," Felice said. "And I wanted to bring Patchogue to the way it was when I was a kid."

CHALLENGES

Neighbors opposed, worrying about adding more renters to a town where absentee landlords subdivided houses that were often neglected, said Heather Felice.

"My father really had to struggle with the village to get it permitted," she said, adding that her father lives on site and serves as property manager.

New Village also faced resistance, noted Bob Coughlan, principal of Tritec.

"Many residents and business owners feared change and that it would make things worse," Coughlan said. He noted the village and Tritec were sued twice in 2011 and the development occurred during the 2008 financial crisis, making it difficult to get financing.

Despite that, Tritec built relationships with officials and locals through significant community outreach, which included preserving the Carnegie Library.

"This allowed us to invest more than \$112 million in the village and the project," Coughlan said.

GAINING MOMENTUM

With the success of Seacrest Village, Pontieri looked for more housing opportunities to recreate the thriving downtown of his childhood. The village pursued developments like the 80-townhouse condominium Copper Beech Village, completed in 2008 at the site of the former Johnny's Luncheonette.

"You had to have feet on the street for any kind of business to prosper. And you always get that with housing," Pontieri said.

In 2006, Chef Eric Rifkin opened Bobbique on West Main Street, heralding a restaurant revival, said Pontieri. It was soon followed by Artspace — 45 affordable lofts for artists with monthly rents ranging from \$951 for a studio to \$1,667 for a three-bedroom.

Tritec completed New Village at Patchogue in 2014, consisting of 291 rental units and 45,000 square feet of retail space.

The village-owned Patchogue Theatre for the Performing Arts, previously renovated in 1998, was refurbished in 2016 and 2017. The revamp, funded with \$1.5 million through a private foundation, helped turn the area into a cultural destination.

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Patchogue presently boasts about 35 restaurants.

"Spaces stay vacant for a very short period of time," said Pontieri, adding Patchogue's sewer plant helped make development possible.

Condos and single-family homes sell quickly, attracting multi-generational buyers, said Heather Felice.

Homes priced between \$400,000 and \$700,000 often sell within a week, she said.

LESSONS AND TAKEAWAYS



Patchogue today sports more than 30 restaurants, and storefronts rarely stay vacant for long, officials said. Credit: Steve Pfof; Ivy Neal

With its newfound population, parking can be an issue, which the village has addressed by installing meters to help finance the expansion of a key parking lot.

"I believe our focus on housing, sewers, parks and the village's diversity created the foundation for the revitalization of our downtown," Pontieri said. "No plan is perfect, but there aren't any major decisions I would change."

Farmingdale



An area near the LIRR went from warehouses, seen in 2012, to apartment and retail complexes, in 2024. Credit: John Paraskevas; Rick Kopstein

THE DOWNTURN

With the advent of online shopping and growing popularity of big box stores around 2003 and 2004, businesses began closing in downtown Farmingdale, noted Mayor Ralph Ekstrand.

TURNING POINT

In 2009, the village was awarded a New York State Brownfield Opportunity Area grant to spruce up the neighborhood around the train station, which consisted of distressed warehouses and rundown storefronts, said Ekstrand, a 44-year resident.

Farmingdale used the grant to hire VHB, a national planning and design firm with offices in Hauppauge, to create a master plan.

"The No. 1 thing that came up was changing the zoning to have mixed use and transit-oriented development, which is now throughout Long Island," said Ekstrand, who's been mayor for 12 years.

CHALLENGES



Farmingdale Mayor Ralph Ekstrand is also the pharmacist/manager of Moby Drugs. Credit: Rick Kopstein

Many resisted, believing the complexes were both too big and high.

"I tried to talk them off the ledge that this is needed and this will work and the ones that wouldn't listen, I ignored," Ekstrand said.

Commercial spaces were also designed for hardware and large equipment repair shops — a relic of the area's farming roots.

"We have these very large footprints and that works great for a big restaurant, but it doesn't really work in today's day and age for retail," said Joseph Garcia, president of the Farmingdale Chamber of Commerce.

Farmingdale's lack of foot traffic, Garcia said, means new retail "tends to struggle unless they have a niche product with a core following."

Still, many businesses seemingly found their footing and most restaurants have been in business at least 10 years, outperforming Small Business Administration stats, Garcia said.

GAINING MOMENTUM



TODs like Fairfield complexes, top, and The Lofts at Farmingdale were built amid the downtown revamp. Credit: Rick Kopstein

New zoning established in 2012 helped the village add 450 apartments, including the 154-unit Jefferson in 2013 and The Cornerstone, a 42-unit building, in 2016, both developed by Terwilliger & Bartone.

New housing brought more residents, mostly between 25 and 35 years old, Ekstrand estimated, as well as empty nesters. Businesses — mostly restaurants — soon followed.

Parking has not been too great a problem, said Ekstrand, because people come and go at different times. He added crime has not increased and that there is a large police presence on weekend nights in the village.

"Over the last 20 years, you went from empty spaces to now people wishing we had more retail," said Garcia. "Whereas 20, 25 years ago, we were just wishing somebody would rent the spaces."

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While Farmingdale doesn't naturally get a lot of foot traffic, experts said, businesses have been able to find their footing and draw followings. Credit: Newsday/J. Conrad Williams Jr.

Farmingdale is much more desirable and has low housing inventory, said agent Mary Macaluso, of Compass Real Estate, who's sold in the area for 23 years.

Co-ops are increasingly popular and more affordable for first-time buyers, she added.

"The downtown revitalization has a lot to do with it," said Macaluso, noting school athletic facilities and public parks upgrades have only attracted more outsiders.

Buyers from New York City are drawn by the LIRR, said Macaluso.

"Farmingdale has a double blessing, because it has not only a train station, but it also has the downtown."

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Not everyone approves of Farmingdale's growing popularity. Hank Pieloch voiced concern at meetings about Staller Associates' vision in 2018 for a mixed-use development along Main Street, which helped quash the developer's plans.

"I'm not for it," said Pieloch, now 81, who recalled a rural Farmingdale filled with mom-and-pop shops when he moved there nearly 58 years ago.

"It's getting more citified. I don't like it and I attribute it all to the bars and restaurants in town," said Pieloch, a retired Nassau County Fire and Police Emergency Medical Services Academy administrator. "It's good for the village economically, but not for the residents."

LESSONS AND TAKEAWAYS

Though he believes the revitalization was successful, Ekstrand wishes the village had more parking.

"With the revival of downtown, on a weekend we get 4,500 to 5,000 people coming to town, starting at Friday happy hour and leaving at 2 in the morning," said Ekstrand, noting the addition of 400 parking spots in recent years.

"There's no open space for any more parking lots, so we're sort of stymied."

Westbury



Mayor Peter Cavallaro continued the work of his predecessor to encourage revitalization in downtown Westbury, seen in 2024 and 2013. Credit: Newsday/Alejandra Villa Loarca; Newsday/J. Conrad Williams Jr.

THE DOWNTURN

Westbury, like many other downtowns, lost mom-and-pop shops in the '90s to malls and shopping centers and began to show signs of wear and tear.

"We used to have three hardware stores on Post Avenue," said Mayor Pete Cavallaro, elected in 2009. "Home Depot and Lowe's basically put all of those out of business."

TURNING POINT

The previous mayor, Ernest Strada, started redevelopment in the early 2000s through façade improvement and permitting multi-family homes around the downtown, noted Cavallaro.

"When I became mayor, I basically made it a goal that I wanted to take those efforts to the next level," said Cavallaro, who previously served on the planning board and board of trustees for a combined 22 years.

Terwilliger & Bartone Properties developed The Cornerstone, a 130-unit complex at the Westbury LIRR station. The first building opened in September; the second opened earlier this month, said managing partner Anthony Bartone.

THE CHALLENGES

Aware of locals' resistance to change, Bartone said, "We try to work with the community to help them understand what we're doing, the pros and cons."

Developing in an industrial area meant ensuring their new plans didn't disrupt nearby businesses. When they conducted new zoning and environmental impact studies, they looked at potential traffic and school enrollment effects, Cavallaro said.

"We haven't seen any material impact at this point in time," he said. "In fact, the data shows that the kind of development that we've zoned for will have a minimal headcount impact on the school district, but a material benefit economically to the school district."

GAINING MOMENTUM

"We were the first developer to get in the ground under their new zoning laws," said Bartone, referring to laws that came into effect in 2019.

Bartone credits Westbury officials for their efforts to add transit-oriented development downtown.

"There are communities ... that send that signal out to the development community saying they're open for business," said Bartone. "We react to those signals and try to build in communities that want to see this type of revitalization."

Stating that "Retail follows rooftops," Bartone said, "If there's no foot traffic and there's nobody coming to the downtown, you're not going to attract those national A-rated tenants that you want."

In 2016, Westbury was the first Long Island community to receive a New York State Downtown Revitalization Initiative grant, Cavallaro said.

The \$10 million grant enabled rezoning 52 acres of light industrial development that includes warehouses, a wholesale bakery, trucking and masonry supply yards adjacent to the train station to transit-oriented development; upgrading downtown streetscape; replacing sidewalks, benches, and trees; renovating the community center and improving business facades.

"We tried to identify specific needs and specific ways that we would make a significant impact and we had seven projects that were actually funded," said Cavallaro, a lifelong resident.

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Though he's nostalgic about the Westbury of yesteryear, Cavallaro said he's clear-eyed that it's never going to be 1950 again.

"Our goal was not to look backwards. It was basically to look forward and say, 'What do we need to do, consistent with the changes, to keep the community competitive, attractive and sustainable for five years and 50 years from now,' " he said.

With 800 residential units already in Westbury's downtown, the 2019 zoning will facilitate hundreds more in the coming years, help meet the demand for housing, Cavallaro said, and "help our downtown with more people living next to it to use the services and the businesses that are there."

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Both sales and rentals go quickly in Westbury, which could benefit from additional housing options, noted Wendy Liotti, an agent with Compass Real Estate, who's lived in the village since 1977.

"Whenever I do have a rental, I have multiple inquiries, multiple applications," said Liotti, calling Westbury welcoming, vibrant and diverse.

Westbury Arts' building hosts performances, art exhibits and classes, and is right off Post Avenue. It was also financed through the NYS grant.

"That has always been our goal: to make ourselves an arts and cultural destination on Long Island," said Julie Lyon, president of Westbury Arts organization.

LESSONS AND TAKEAWAYS

You need to build consensus in your community and be mindful of protecting the existing housing stock, said Cavallaro.

"You don't want to do something that's going to devalue the properties of the single-family homes, for instance, that are already in the community," Cavallaro said, adding, "You have to really tailor what you're trying to accomplish for all the attributes your community has."

Acknowledging his *raison d'être* as mayor, he added, "We get elected to basically make sure the community is better off going forward than when we took charge of it."

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