



PARAMUS REGIONAL CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

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ABOUT PARAMUS

Local Retailers

Paramus Park Mall

Westfield Garden State Plaza

Bergen Town Center Vornado

Fashion Center

Paramus Towne Square

Mall at IV

Thirty Five Plaza

Paramus Shopping

Why Paramus Prospers

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Fifty years ago, two malls rose from the farms and pastures of Paramus, sparking the transformation of this borough of celery farms into one of the great retail capitals of the nation.

That same year, the borough imposed some of the toughest blue laws in the country to give residents a break from all the traffic and shoppers.

To this day, residents say they put up with the madness of Saturday because they know Routes 4 and 17 will be gloriously empty come Sunday. And, because all those stores allow them to pay \$800 less in property taxes each year.

But for Paramus to stay on top -- it racked up \$3 billion in sales last year alone -- it's got to keep changing, local business leaders and developers say.

"In Paramus, everything old will get replaced with something new -- whether it's little ranch houses and bungalows getting converted into McMansions or older stores getting updated or replaced," says Chamber of Commerce President Dimitri Miaoulis, who owns a computer consulting business.

"If you could accumulate enough land to build a complex with offices, a conference center and a hotel, that would hit a home run," he said.

In 2005, the Paramus ZIP code ranked first in the county in sales. New stores such as Target and Whole Foods are on their way in. Chuck Lanyard, head of the Goldstein group, a regional real-estate firm, says that for Paramus to continue thriving, the biggest factor is the region's economy.

"Retailers need to continue to do strong business because their rents are so high," he said.

And the traffic -- an estimated 300,000 vehicles pass through the Routes 17 and 4 crossroads each weekday -- has got to keep moving.

Paramus -- and all of North Jersey -- needs a good mass-transit system to keep thriving, says real-estate developer Al Sauer, who has "known Paramus since it was celery farms and two-lane roads."

"Without it," he says, "the region will get arteriosclerosis, we'll all be stopped dead on Route 4 and 17, and nobody will be able to go anywhere."

The more things change ...

Fritz Behnke remembers the first time he got stuck in a Paramus traffic jam -- it was back in the 1930s.

After the George Washington Bridge and Route 4 were built, stores popped up along the

thoroughfare, says the 88-year-old Behnke, who grew up on his family's farm on Farview Avenue. A discount appliance store on Route 4 called Master's "created horrible traffic jams, especially on Sundays," he says.

The tie-up was a byproduct of a formula that has been immensely successful for decades: Paramus + shopping = \$\$\$\$.

Paramus became a boomtown after World War II, when returning GIs wanted their own homes -- and Paramus had all that farmland less than 10 miles from the bridge.

Real-estate interests began buying up property near the intersection of Routes 4 and 17. Locals thought the developers were crazy because the land was so mucky.

"We never had a nickel. When a farmer sold a farm for \$500 an acre, that was a lot," Behnke says.

Farms soon gave way to housing developments and stores. The borough's population jumped from 6,000 to 24,000 during the Fifties.

Vilma Babin and her husband were part of that boom.

In 1957, they built their home on a wooded acre on an unpaved street. They paid \$4,400 for the land. (An acre in Paramus today -- if you could find one -- would sell for \$2 million.)

Back then, both 17 and 4 were two lanes, with traffic lights and pedestrian crossings. Traffic was already horrendous. Route 4 was so clogged that local police had dubbed it "Ulcer Alley."

With the malls coming, the desire for peace on Sundays became a rallying cry. When the Borough Council passed the Sunday closing ordinance in late March that year, Garden State Plaza's arrival was five weeks away. And when Paramus voters ratified those blue laws that November, the Bergen Mall -- now called the Bergen Town Center -- was just opening.

The ordinance prohibits all "worldly employment, or business, except works of necessity or charity" on Sunday. Even South Carolina, deep in the Bible Belt, allows shopping on Sundays from 1:30 to 6 p.m.

"Sundays became heavenly," says Babin, whose home was near Garden State Plaza.

Still, she remembers the police being a little overzealous.

"My husband was cutting the lawn on this dead-end street of ours on a Sunday," she recalls. "This policeman approached him and said, 'You can't do that.' My husband asked if he was making too much noise, and the policeman replied, 'No, [you're violating the] blue laws.'"

By 1957, Paramus finally was big enough to build its own high school. Fred Cotterell was part of 400 or so -- all freshmen and sophomores -- to attend it that first year.

Paramus High became "the town center that Paramus had lacked," says Cotterell, now a social studies supervisor for the borough's school system. "Even residents without kids started going to football games. And the high school itself ... it became our Main Street."

Talk to parents attending events at the high school on a recent Friday night, and they'd all say pretty much the same thing when asked how Paramus has changed: More traffic, more diversity and overdevelopment.

Almost everyone agrees that the borough's biggest challenge is cutting that Gordian knot that ties up traffic six days a week.

Despite the blue laws, retail occupancy rates remain phenomenally high. Recent or upcoming arrivals include Smith & Hawkins, Raymour & Flanigan and Trader Joe's.

Says John O'Connor, senior vice president of retail sales for 1-800-Mattress: "We opened a very small showroom on Route 17, and I'd say that although our location is a C+, we're doing A++ business. It's our third-best-volume store out of 50 stores -- even though it's only open six days a week, even though most of our stores are larger in size."

O'Connor loves the blue laws because "we do a heck of a lot of business on Saturday and Monday, and it's a built-in day off for the people who work in our busy store."

Joseph Roth, director of public affairs for Ikea USA, is less enthusiastic. "We trust city leadership to act appropriately in moving the community forward. We would have greater sales, of course, but that's a municipal decision."

Mike Zippelli, whose company has a successful store in Garden State Plaza, would like the blue laws to end.

"I sure would like to be open Sunday," says Zippelli, president of Maryland-based Dormia mattresses. "The salespeople in the store might disagree, but I don't know if we get that business back. Stores in Paramus do really well, but it's inconceivable how well they would do if they were open seven days a week."

Maybe so, but don't expect the blue laws to change. The last time they were put to a vote, in November 1993, Paramus residents voted to keep them by a thumping 13-1 margin. Dictators don't win by bigger landslides.

"The blue laws are the only thing that all the people in Paramus agree on," says Paul Contillo, who once represented Paramus and nearby towns in the state Senate.

The high school, currently undergoing a facelift, will hold a big anniversary weekend in late September. Garden State Plaza has embarked on a \$100 million upgrade, including a 16-screen movie theater, another restaurant and a dozen stores at the mall's south end. Bergen Town Center begins a \$170 million overhaul and expansion this spring.

As for the 50th anniversary of the blue laws, residents say they will celebrate the way they always do: by breaking into a smile every Sunday when they pull onto an unclogged Route 4 or 17.

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