

# New life for Church Avenue businesses

BY HELEN KLEIN

Change is coming to Church Avenue.

A new natural foods store, Downtown Natural, opened earlier this month on the strip near E. 17th Street, the second upscale store to try to make a go of it on the avenue in the past four years.

The move — plus efforts by the city to revamp the strip — has local businesspeople hopeful that, finally, Church Avenue's time has come.

Real estate agent Jan Rosenberg said her office had recently started showing a corner property on Church Avenue at the heart of what she calls the "dead zone," between Coney Island Avenue and Argyle Road. There are some day care centers, hair salons and bodegas on that portion of the strip, but also a lot of empty storefronts which, in Rosenberg's eyes, represent potential.

"It seems ripe for some

sort of turnover that might serve the neighborhood as well as all the people who go to the Parade Ground," Rosenberg said. "There are thousands of people, but very few places to go and get something to drink."

The Church Avenue Business Improvement District has also targeted Church Avenue's western end, said Lauren Collins, the organization's executive director, who said that Downtown Natural is poised pretty much smack in the middle of the thoroughfare's two distinct zones and could serve as a bridge between the two.

Among the BID's efforts, said Collins, is an ongoing campaign to attract new businesses that would complement existing businesses on the street to the portion of Church Avenue near Coney Island Avenue, and that would attract new shoppers from nearby Ditmas Park, as well as people utilizing the Parade Ground



Amit Pater of Downtown Health, one of the new businesses on Church Avenue. Photo by Arthur De Gaeta

and shoppers who already patronize stores on the strip's bustling eastern end.

"We want to bring it up to the point where people can find what they need, and it can be more of a destination than it is right now," said Collins, who said the recipe for success combines support for existing businesses, improvements in the strip's appearance, and

letting the public know exactly what they will be able to find on Church Avenue.

Also in the offing are new, historic streetlights, that should be installed within the next few weeks, as well as a city-funded streetscape improvement project — expected to begin in 2012 or 2013 — whose goal is to help make Church Avenue more user-friendly,

Collins said.

Among the \$3.5 million project's goals, she said, are "to address flooding issues, install easier street crossings through curb extensions and pedestrian ramps, and add traffic signals."

There's a ways to go, however, before Church Avenue is ready for its close-up. Windsor Terrace resident

Jonathan Leeds, the owner of NYC Icy — whose sherbet flavors range from Creamsicle to Creme Brûlée, and Chai to Chocolate — points out that his small eatery is the only store of its kind on the strip, and it still is only open seasonally.

"We need a couple of cute restaurants, some coffee shops, a bar," Leeds said. "We're lucky enough to be a sort of destination, with people coming from other neighborhoods, but, at night, it's quiet. There's no one walking up and down."

That could change as the strip is reinvented. It's happened before in New York, Leeds pointed out, citing the East Village as a classic example of a New York neighborhood that turned itself around.

"Remember how horrible it was in the '90s, and look at how it is now," Leeds said. "Prices here are at the right level to give people an opportunity."