

WALL STREET JOURNAL

Beach 116th Street in Rockaway Park Edges Toward Destination Status

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A mural on Beach 116th Street in Rockaway Park, Queens.



Rockapup and other stores along Beach 116th Street.

When Georjean McHale was growing up in Rockaway Beach in the 1990s, she rarely ventured over to Beach 116th Street, an area then plagued by panhandlers and blighted buildings. Yet when she was looking to open a juice bar this summer, the commercial strip seemed like the perfect place.

"It wasn't always a great block and it's coming back a bit and I'd love to help it come back," said the 34-year-old who opened Local Liquids on Beach 116th in July. "I've seen people on 116th that I haven't seen in a long time and it's really nice," said Ms. McHale, who still lives in the area.

In the past five years, an upscale butcher, a spa, a cozy gift shop, a pet store and a takeout place serving red quinoa have opened on the two-block stretch of 116th Street between Beach Channel Drive on Jamaica Bay and the ocean front.

For Liz Smith Breslin, who in 2009 opened Blue Bungalow, a Hamptons-like shop that sells handmade goods, the block offered a big space that was midway between homeowners in Belle Harbor and hipsters who frequent streets in the Beach 90s.

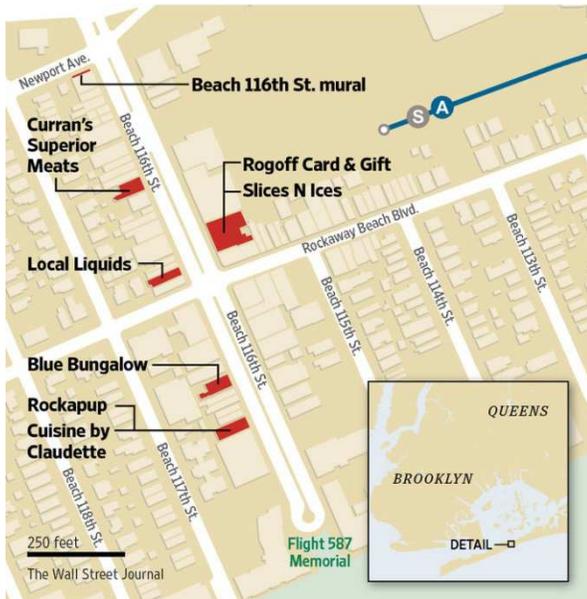
"We wanted to be in a place that would be inviting to all ends of the peninsula. A lot of people leave the peninsula to go shopping and we wanted to provide a place where people didn't have to do that," said Ms. Breslin.

Soon after she opened, other businesses arrived in the neighborhood, included Rockapup, a pet store that sells small surfboards outfitted with pet-food bowls; Cuisine by Claudette, which is a catering and takeout place; and Curran's Superior Meats. In addition, Bungalow Spa opened above Ms. Breslin's storefront.

Last winter, local attorney Jay Friedhand bought a 7,500-square-foot building on the strip, a space currently leased to Rogoff Card and Gift, a stationery store in business for 40 years, Slices N Ices and a convenience store. He said he has no immediate plans to bring in new tenants but purchased the property to retain a local footprint in the area—and keep 99-cent stores out.

"We want to make it a destination place," said the 44-year-old. "I think it will improve in the long term and I would like to be part of it."

While there's been an explosion of growth east of Beach 116th Street with culinary magnets like Rockaway Taco on Beach 96th Street and Rippers Bar on Beach 86th Street, the gentrification of Beach 116th Street has been slower.



Historically, the street has served as the hub of Rockaway Beach because of its easy access to transportation. Rush-hour A trains, the Rockaway Park shuttle line and multiple bus lines serve Beach 116th, making it a regular stop for work commuters and day trippers.

But the street has struggled to secure local shoppers since it also attracted homeless people and drifters who lived in nearby single-room-occupancy hotels and halfway houses.

Still, more young couples are moving into the area, making it an opportunity for new business to come in, said Maureen Walsh, a broker with Walsh Properties.

"We are doing really well but prices are not what they were in 2012" before superstorm Sandy, said Ms. Walsh.

The lower costs of homes since Sandy has "created an opportunity for our young people to get back in the game," said Ms. Walsh.

After the storm wiped out the boardwalk, merchants created the Beach 116th Street Partnership, and with the help of the city's Department of Small Business Services, the group secured grants to spruce up storefronts, install welcome signs and add more streetlights to the block.

The area police presence was also bolstered.

"The business growth was pre-Sandy and it's picking up again," said Krzysztof Sadlej, the partnership's executive director.

The partnership is also pushing for more events, holding a festival for Poland's International Children's Day in June and planning a fall festival in October.

While progress is taking longer than some would like, store owners and residents remain hopeful that quaint shops and must-try eateries will continue to surface on Beach 116th Street.

"It should be our main shopping street with tables and chairs and restaurants, just like in every other beach town," said Ms. Breslin.