

FLATBUSH AVENUE BID NEEDS ANALYSIS

Prepared by Pratt Center for Community Development
January 2015

Flatbush Ave BID



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Background and Introduction

In 2014, the Flatbush Avenue BID contracted with the Pratt Center for Community Development to conduct a needs analysis for the organization, its catchment area, and individual businesses, as well as prepare a comprehensive inventory of all the commercial establishments in the district. Three different surveys informed the study: a door-to-door field survey of each property, interviews with business owners, and a survey of shoppers and other “users” of the district. This document presents the findings from analyzing these surveys; synthesizes the findings into a consideration of the area's strengths/opportunities and weaknesses/threats; and recommends steps that the BID staff and Board can take to further strengthen the BID as a good place to do business that meets the needs of a wide range of local stakeholders.

Field Survey

The field survey process documented a little over 300 non-residential establishments in the BID (and one of the deliverables from this effort to the BID is a comprehensive inventory with a one-page “fact sheet” for each of them). They consist of a broad range of businesses like restaurants, clothing stores, grocers, beauty salons, and stores that sell household goods, with the few exceptions including schools, health care offices, and houses of worship. The businesses are characterized by a healthy mix of independent and both national and regional chains, and there are a few vacant storefronts.

Business Survey

104 businesses were surveyed, and their aggregated responses help create an overall profile of the Flatbush Avenue commercial district. Their individual responses will help the BID do targeted outreach to specific business owners who could potentially use assistance with things like making physical improvements to their stores and promoting their business. Only 15% of the surveyed businesses recently considered closing or relocating, and the top reasons they cited were the weak business climate and unaffordable rents.

Storefront Improvements

Almost half of the businesses surveyed made recent improvements to their stores, from smaller cosmetic changes like painting or installing new lights to larger renovations. Most of them still have solid gates. The future requirement that storefronts have mesh gates is an opportunity for the BID to provide assistance to these merchants so that they can eventually replace solid gates with mesh ones.

Business Promotion

Half of the business owners interviewed do not advertise, relying on word-of-mouth to promote their business. However, advertising and promotion were the most popular type of service that businesses thought could enhance their ability to do business. This presents a key opportunity for how the BID can assist local merchants.

Shopper Survey

Demographic Profile and Shopping Preferences

70% of the survey respondents were women, and different age groups were represented. A range of household incomes were also represented in the survey, with the online respondents more likely to be from higher-income households than those who were intercepted on the sidewalk. Close to half of the people surveyed go to Flatbush Avenue (i.e., the BID) because they live nearby, but a significant portion of people travel to the area from other places to shop or go to school. Walking and subway

were the two most common travel modes for getting to the Avenue. The top five shopping and service destinations were: grocery stores, restaurants, banks, pharmacies, and adult clothing. Over half of people did not have preference between having more chains versus having more independent stores; only 7% said they preferred chains, and nearly 40% favor small, locally-owned retail.

Needed Improvements to the District

Dirty sidewalks, stores in need of improved appearances, and a perceived lack of safety emerged as top issues in the eyes of shoppers and users of the BID. 70% said that improving sidewalk cleanliness is “very much needed,” 61% feel that stores very much need to improve their appearances, and 57% reported that improving safety is “very much needed.” Increasing the number of trash cans and expanding sidewalk sweeping service for 50 feet into some of the blocks that are perpendicular to Flatbush were suggested as ways to reduce sidewalk litter. Increasing the presence of beat police and installing more cameras were offered up as ways to increase safety (or at least the perception of safety).

40% said that more street lights at night are very much needed, which was the same proportion of people who feel that more seating is a strong need. Public bathrooms ranked only a bit lower than street lights and seating in terms of need. Other ways to improve the streetscape that people suggested were to repair the sidewalk and have more landscaping with trees and planters.

Relative to the other needs, parking did not turn out to be a very strong one, likely an indication that most of the survey respondents live close to the BID. However, pedestrian safety and traffic flow are areas of concern for local stakeholders, and survey respondents mentioned several ways to mitigate traffic congestion and an unsafe pedestrian environment, including better enforcement of existing traffic laws (e.g., double parking), the creation of dedicated loading zones, and clearer left-turn lane markings.

Suggestions for New Retail

While this section of Flatbush Avenue is a lively commercial corridor by day, it slows down considerably in the evenings. As such, the BID is interested in knowing what new uses could be introduced to the district to encourage people to stay in (or travel to) the area in the evenings and on weekends. The survey posed this question to people in an open-ended format, and while it yielded a range of responses, several categories of retail emerged as the most commonly desired. Restaurants were the most popular category, with many providing qualifiers such as “good” and “sit-down.” This reflects the fact that there are currently very few restaurants with table service; the majority are oriented to take-out. Many respondents spoke of a need for more variety and expanding the current selection of eateries, a likely reflection of the relative lack of diversity in eating options. Fast food and West Indian cuisine currently dominate the food scene on Flatbush. Bars and movie theaters followed close behind restaurants as types of businesses that would keep people in the area during after-work hours.

Survey respondents also offered up ideas about the types of activities or events – apart from shopping -- that would entice them to make the area a destination. Live music and street fairs were the most commonly cited ones, with the former due to become a reality with the imminent opening of the restored Kings Theatre as a major New York City performance venue. However, this should not preclude the entry of other less formal venues or forums for live music to the area. Several respondents spoke to a need for more child and family-oriented events and activities as a way to draw them to the area during evenings and weekends.

The survey also asked people more generally what types of new businesses they would like to see come to the area. Restaurants were again the most popular retail category, but groceries and markets were also commonly cited as desired retail types. Many people described the types of food

markets they thought were missing with qualifiers such as “upscale,” “gourmet,” “fresh,” or “organic.” Bars and coffee shops were also mentioned with relative frequency. Finally, there were several mentions of people wanting to see clothing stores that were higher end and/or higher quality than what currently exists.

Weaknesses and Threats

This needs assessment confirmed that, like in any shopping district, there are a set of challenges that while not insurmountable will require concerted and in some cases long-term efforts to sufficiently address.

Dirty sidewalks can fuel a perception that the area is an undesirable commercial district, and increased sanitation efforts and better enforcement of existing sanitation regulations can help mitigate this.

The *lack of streetscape amenities* such as benches and planters may contribute to a perception that the district is not particularly hospitable to people who may want to leisurely stroll through the area; it also does not offer shoppers a comfortable respite from being on their feet.

Traffic congestion makes it harder to reach the district by vehicle and also plays a role in creating an unsafe environment for pedestrians.

The *somewhat redundant retail mix* might dissuade some (including those who work in the area but live elsewhere and recent residential arrivals to the neighborhood) from buying goods and services in the district, as they perceive that there is little of interest to them.

The *perceived and/or real threat to personal safety* can also dissuade some people from seeking goods and services in the BID, which in turn can slow down economic activity and make it harder for merchants to stay in business.

Finally, *store appearances that many perceive to be in need of improvement* can also dissuade people from shopping in the district and add to a perception that the stores and businesses – even those with favorable appearances -- do not cater to a broad group of people.

Strengths and Opportunities

This part of Flatbush Avenue also has many strengths and opportunities that the BID can leverage to make the district stronger and even more successful both for those who do business there and for those who rely on the area getting the goods and services they need.

A *strong mix of independent and chain establishments* gives the district a balance of the stability and familiarity that many chain outlets can provide with the more local and unique flavor that non-chain establishments can offer.

The strong *West Indian/Caribbean identity* lends an ethnic feel to the district that highlights Brooklyn and New York City’s immigrant tradition.

The *reopening of the Kings Theatre* is a key and ongoing opportunity to attract new businesses to vacant retail spaces (such as restaurants and bars) that can cater to both performance-goers and to other people who live nearby and feel that the district currently does not offer them much.

The *future redevelopment of the Flatbush Caton Market* into a mixed-use building, if planned for thoughtfully, will bring more consumers into the area while preserving the existing vendors in a redesigned space for them that can help attract more foot traffic.

Finally, the *increasing residential spending power* that can be attributed to the increase of higher-income households in this part of Brooklyn is an opportunity that some existing and future businesses may want to leverage by offering a broader array of goods and services. However, balance in this regard is essential as it will also be important to ensure that the shopping district does not largely transform into a higher-end retail area that local low and moderate-income households can no longer afford.

Recommendations

The following are an inter-related set of recommendations for short and longer-term actions that the BID can take in its ongoing efforts to make the district clean, safe, and profitable for its businesses.

Branding, identity, and placemaking

Making it very clear that the Flatbush Avenue BID is the official entity that oversees the commercial district communicates the notion that an official entity is charged with taking care of the district.

Banners are one way of visually announcing to shoppers that they are in a BID, but other ways to do this should be explored and implemented.

Streetscape improvements and cleanliness

Adding benches, street lights, and other street furniture will make the experience of shopping on the corridor more comfortable and aesthetically-pleasing, thereby potentially drawing more customers to the area. Littered sidewalks could be mitigated with more frequent sanitation services and outreach to merchants to encourage them to help keep the sidewalks cleaner.

Business attraction

Even though the district currently has a relatively low vacancy rate, the vacancies that exist represent opportunities to diversify the current mix of retail and further strengthen the district.

Traffic-calming

The BID may want to consider reaching out to the NYC Department of Transportation and ask it to conduct a formal study traffic conditions on the avenue, eventually implementing measures to calm traffic, smooth its flow, and make the area more pedestrian-friendly.

Outreach to existing businesses

While very labor-intensive, it will be important for the BID to continue its outreach to existing businesses, many of whom appear to be unaware of the BID's existence or that the organization can be of assistance to them.

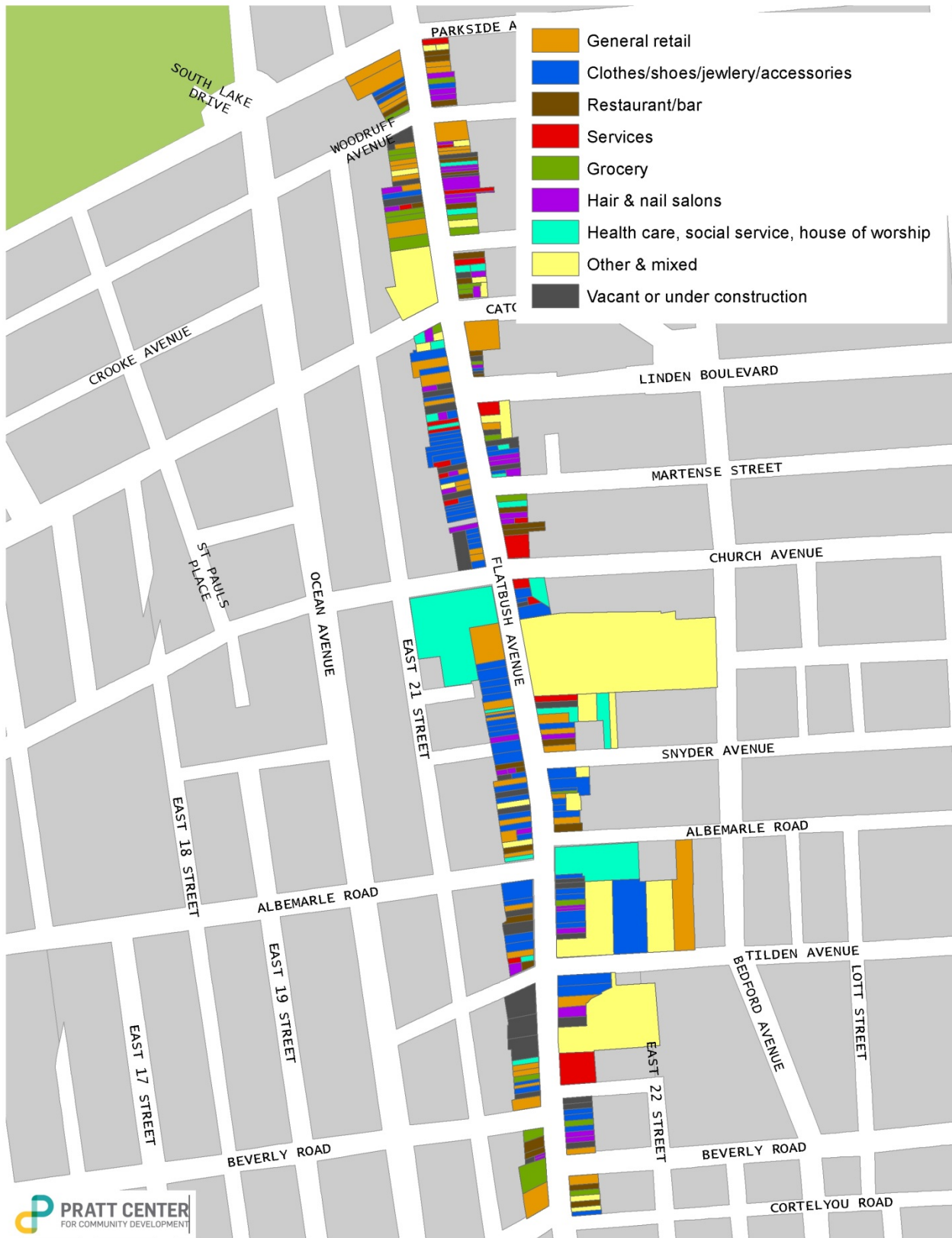
Building partnerships

The BID already enjoys good relationships with key commercial and non-profit institutions in the area, including the 70th police precinct and the Flatbush Reformed Church. It should continue to identify those players to work with for mutual promotion.

Strategic planning/prioritization of next steps

The BID should engage in internal work planning and priority-setting and figure out how to allocate limited resources toward implementing these recommendations.

Establishments by Broad Category



Legend:

- Independent (Blue)
- Local/regional chain or franchise (Orange)
- National chain or franchise (Brown)
- Not applicable (Grey)
- Unsure (Yellow)

Map Labels:

Streets: PARKSIDE AVE, WOODRUFF AVENUE, CATON AVENUE, LINDEN BOULEVARD, MARTENSE STREET, CHURCH AVENUE, WOODS PLACE, ERASMUS STREET, LOTT STREET, SNYDER AVENUE, ALBEMARLE ROAD, OAKLAND PLACE, TILDEN AVENUE, BEDFORD AVENUE, BEVERLY ROAD, EAST 16 STREET, EAST 17 STREET, EAST 18 STREET, EAST 19 STREET, EAST 20 STREET, EAST 21 STREET, EAST 22 STREET, CROOKE AVENUE, SOUTH LAKE DRIVE, PARADE PLACE, ST PAULS COURT, ST PAULS PLACE, TENNIS COURT, OCEAN AVENUE, KENMORE TERRACE, ALBEMARLE TERRACE, REGENT PLACE, CORTLEYOU ROAD, BUCKINGHAM ROAD, BUCKINGHAM ROAD.

Scale: 0, 250, 500, 1,000 ft

Logo: PRATT CENTER FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Vacancy Status*

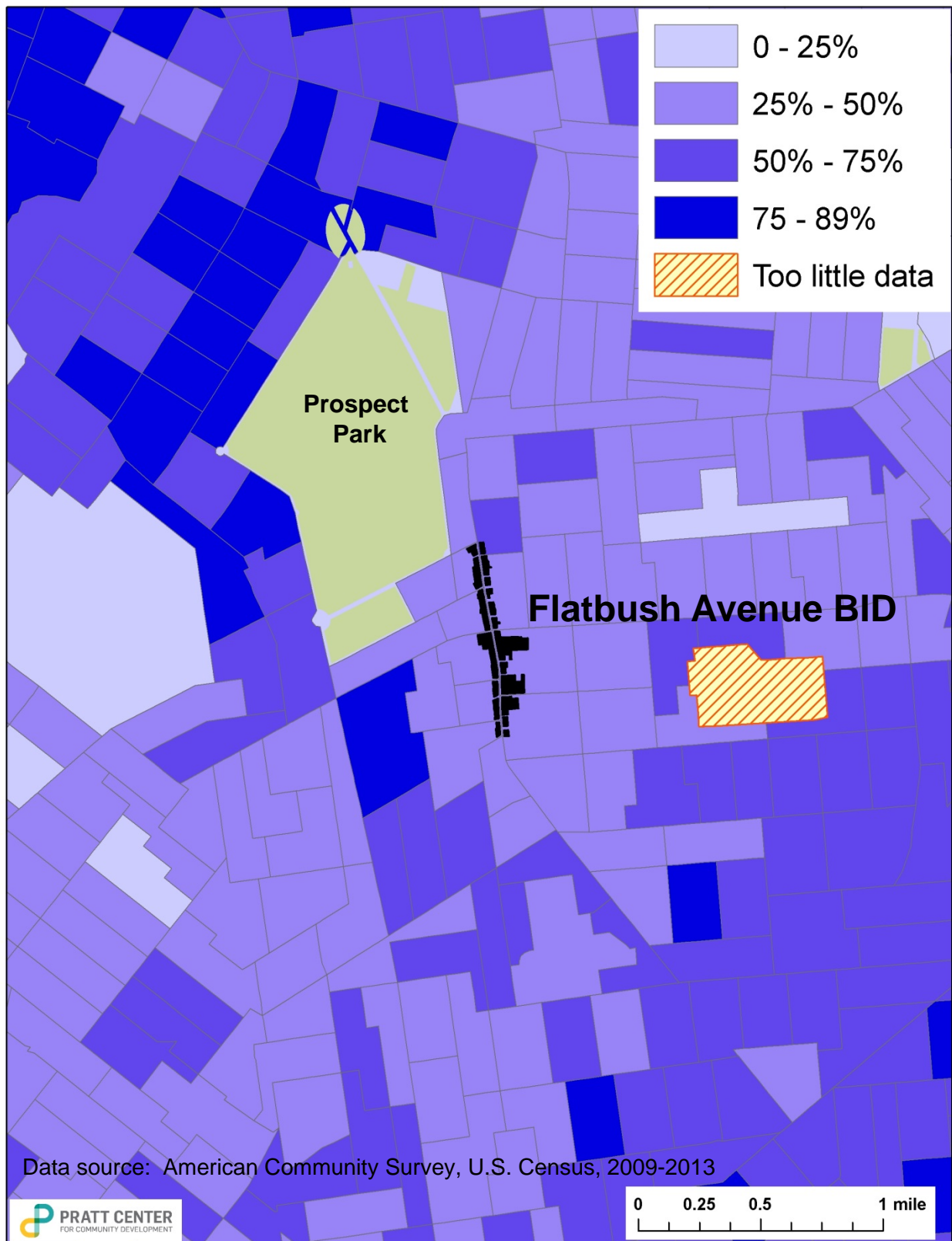


* as of January 2015

Storefront Condition



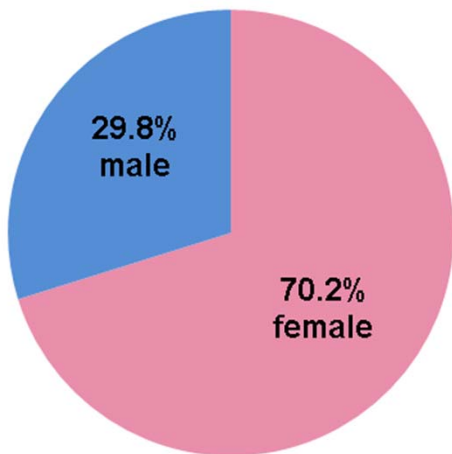
Percentage of Households over \$50,000 (by Census tract)



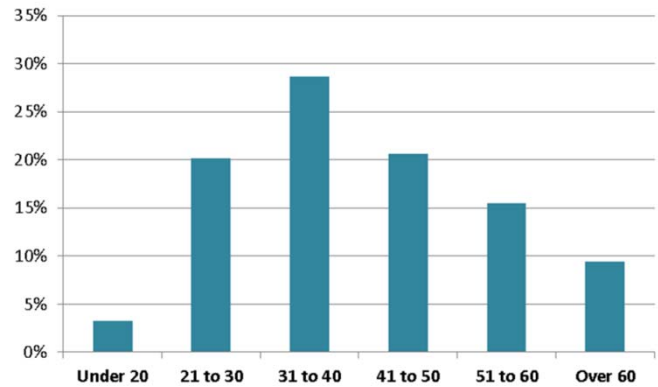
Shopper Survey

- Conducted in Fall 2014
- 231 respondents (103 intercept; 128 online)

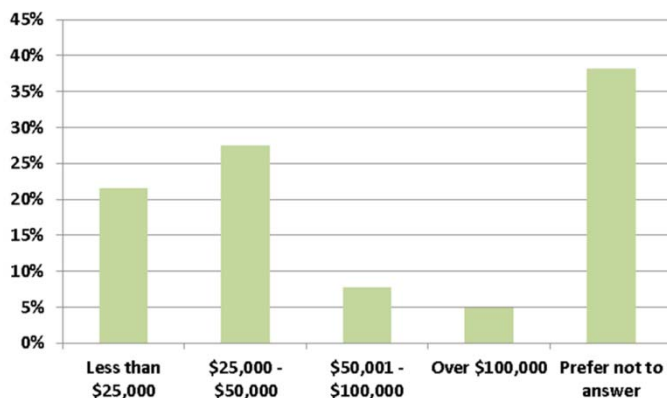
Sex of respondents



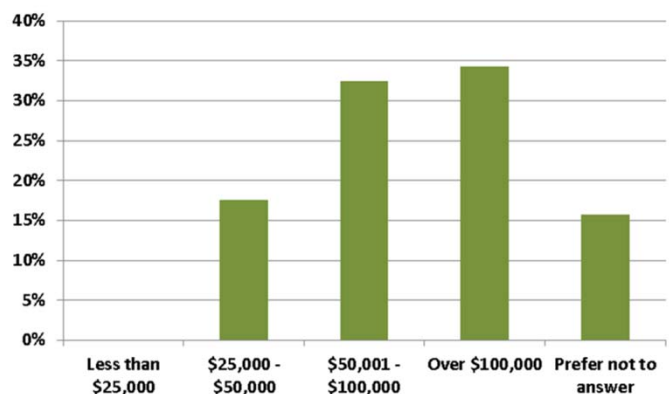
Age of respondents



Household Income: Intercept Respondents

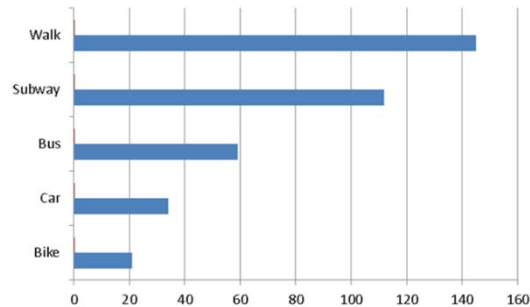


Household Income: Online Respondents

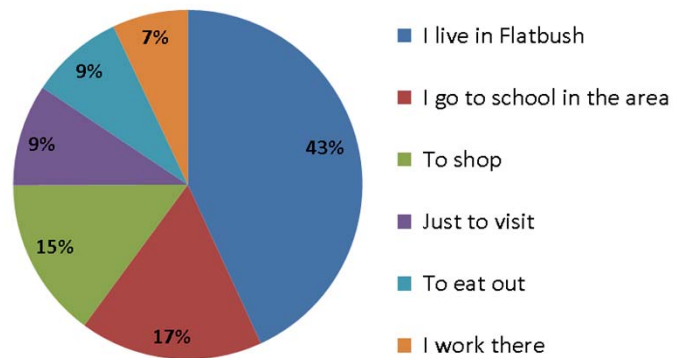


Shopper Survey, cont.

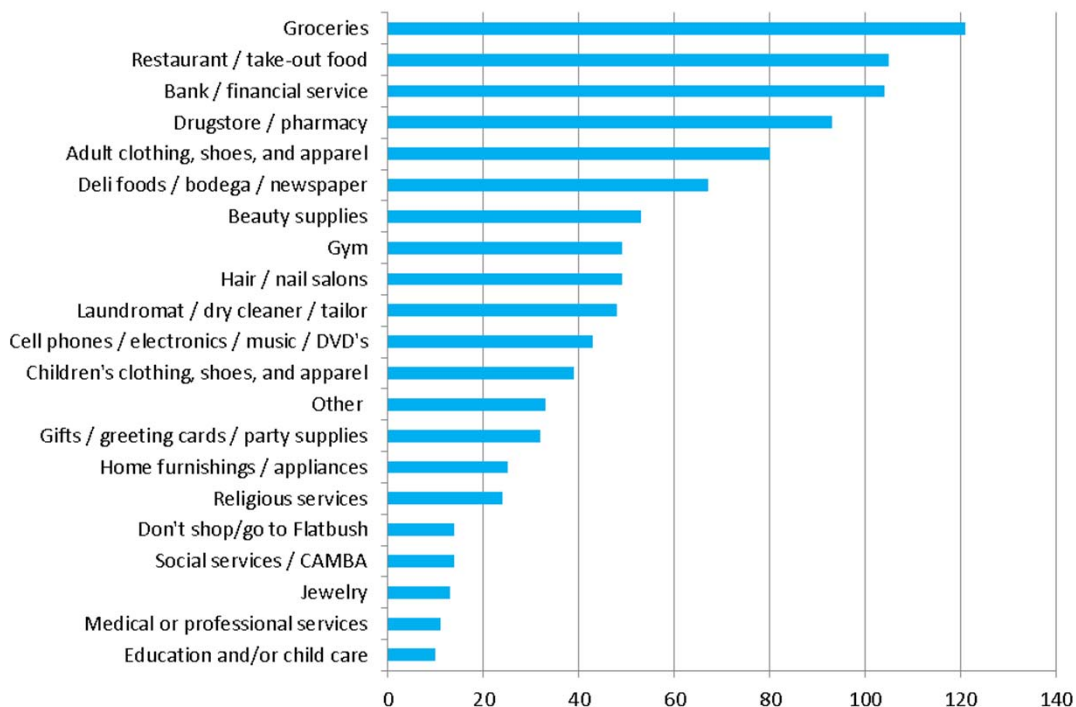
How do you get to Flatbush Ave?



What best describes why you go to Flatbush Ave?



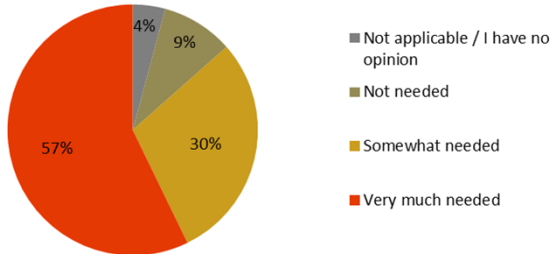
Shopping & Services for which People go to Flatbush Avenue



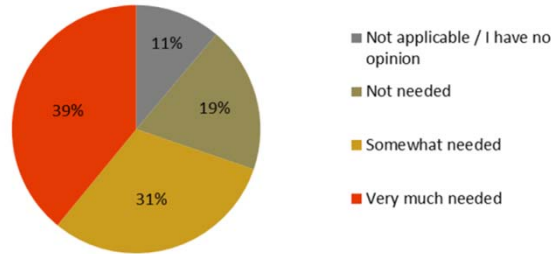
Shopper Survey, cont.

Needed Improvements by Level of Need

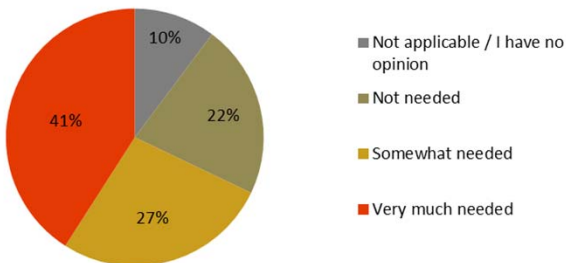
Improved Safety



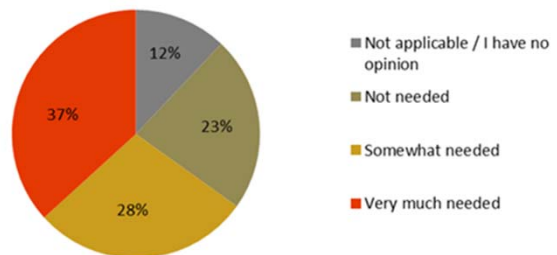
More Street Lights at Night



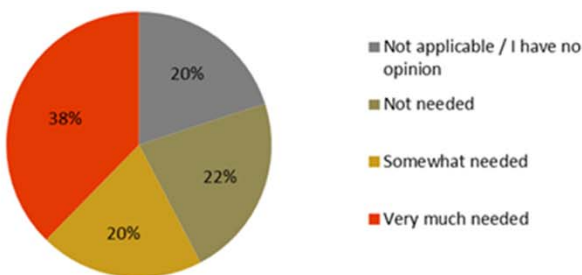
More Seating



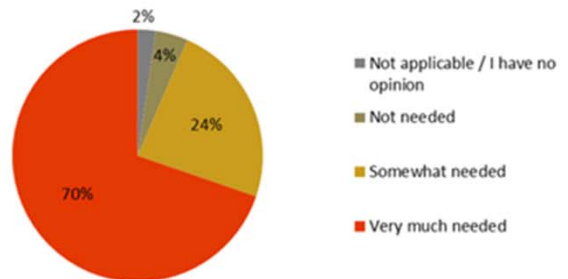
Public Bathrooms



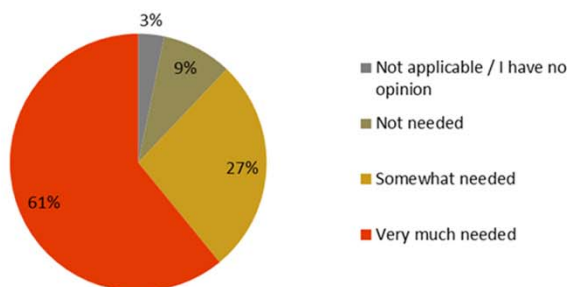
More Parking



Improved cleanliness of sidewalks

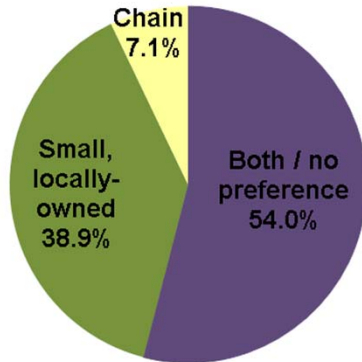


Improved Appearance of Stores



Shopper Survey, cont.

Preference for chain vs. independent stores



Most popular after-work and weekend activities and events that would keep people in the area

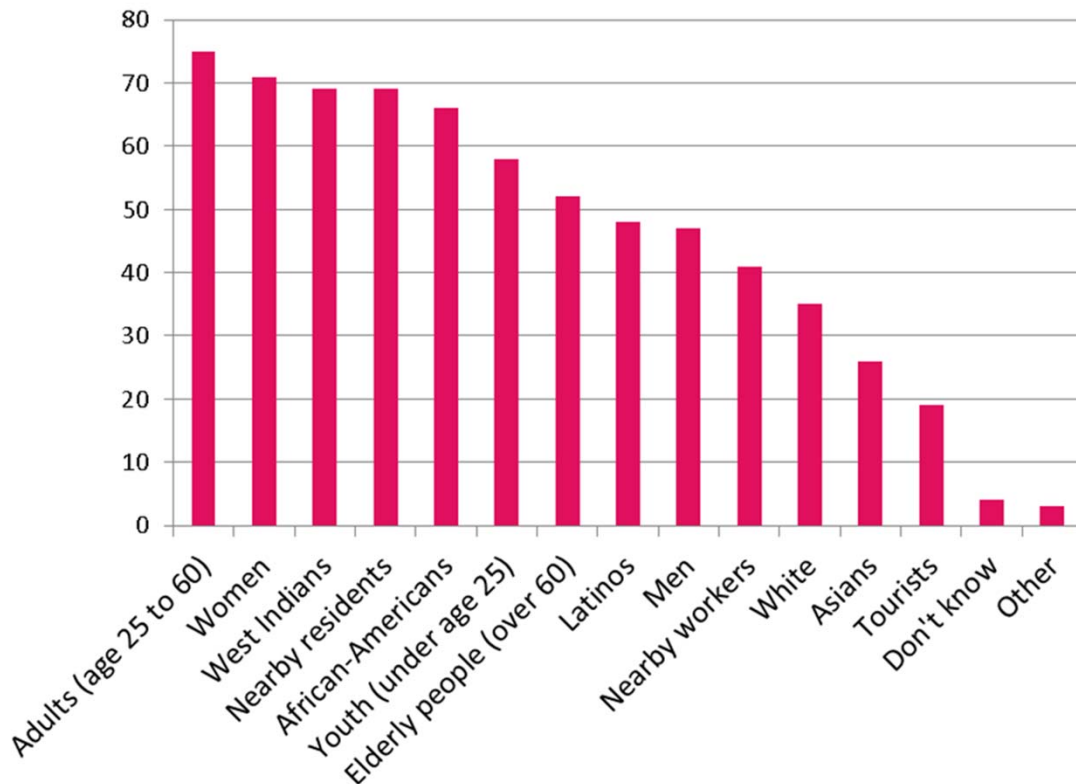
- Restaurants
- Bars
- Movie theaters
- Live music/concerts
- Street fairs
- Kid-oriented/family-friendly
- Shopping
- Coffee shops



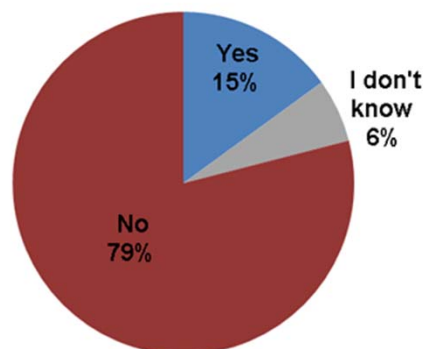
Business Survey

- Conducted in Fall/Winter 2014
- 104 respondents

Significant parts of customer base



Have recently considered closing or relocating



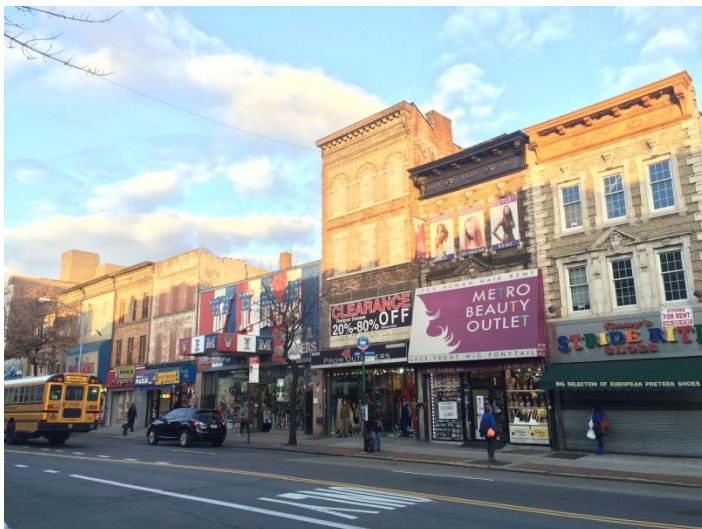
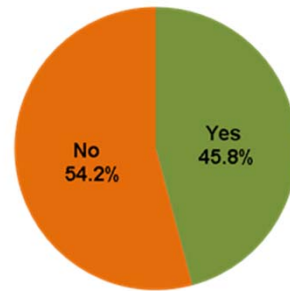
Business Survey, cont.

Type of Security Gate

- Solid 82.5%
- Mesh 7.2%
- Mixed (solid and mesh) 6.2%
- No security gates 4.1%

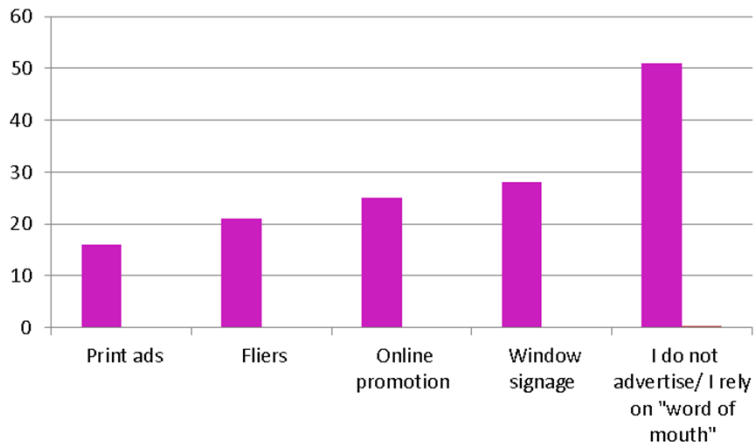


Physical Improvements in Last Two Years



Business Survey, cont.

Ways of Advertising



Services that would enhance merchants' ability to do business

