



RECAPTURING SUBURBAN SHOPPERS

By offering items that aren't available at malls and big-box stores, ethnic retail strips from Jackson Heights to Richmond Hill are attracting hordes of suburban shoppers—and boosting the city's economy.

IT'S NO SECRET THAT IMMIGRANTS HAVE PLAYED A PIVOTAL ROLE IN resuscitating flagging retail strips in downtown Flushing, Jackson Heights, Brighton Beach, Washington Heights and a handful of other neighborhoods across New York City. But in recent years, several of these once-modest retail areas have evolved from primarily serving local customers into regional shopping districts that routinely attract large numbers of second and third generation immigrants from the suburbs who come to buy sari's, spices, plantains, herbal medicines and an assortment of other ethnic products. By having shoppers from outside the five boroughs, these ethnic business districts are making an increasingly powerful impact on the city's economy—and helping the city recapture tax revenue from suburban shoppers after decades in which most of the region's shopping dollars flowed in the opposite direction.

While New York City consumers have long flocked to the suburbs to take advantage of the convenience and lower-priced goods offered at malls and big-box stores, ethnic shopping districts like Flushing and Jackson Heights are prospering because they offer unique goods and services that aren't widely available elsewhere. There and other neighborhoods boast a heavy concentration of immigrant-owned restaurants, food markets, clothing stores, jewelry shops, travel agencies and other businesses selling unique products and providing specialized services. The clusters consistently attract ethnic consumers from all over the tri-state region, particularly on the weekends. In some cases, immigrants who have moved to the suburbs are returning to their old neighborhoods to dine, shop, worship or get together with family and friends. In other instances, immigrants are simply seeking out goods and services that aren't available at stores where they live.

While their contribution remains largely unrecognized by city policymakers and business leaders, these ethnic shopping districts are facilitating the type of economic activity that all cities covet: they attract people from outside the city to spend money here that otherwise probably would have been spent elsewhere.

Commentary/Op-Ed - November 2007

Recapturing Suburban Shoppers

This policy brief shows that ethnic retail strips from Jackson Heights to Richmond Hill are attracting hordes of suburban shoppers—and having a big impact on the city's economy.

by Jonathan Bowles

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