

## Reigniting a Community: Saratoga Street and Park Avenue



A few years ago, the blocks leading up to the intersection of Saratoga Street and Park Avenue in Downtown Baltimore's Westside rarely saw new visitors. Most passers-by were area residents, or shoppers who were visiting retailers in search of particular items. While nearby Lexington Market was, and remains, a bustling center of activity, visitors were hesitant to venture beyond the market's borders.

"Appearance plays a huge role in the way outsiders perceive an area," Downtown Partnership President Kirby Fowler says. "If it doesn't look friendly or inviting, people don't want to go there. If people don't want to go there, it doesn't look friendly and inviting. It's a dangerous cycle."

But thanks to Downtown Partnership efforts, in the past few years that cycle has begun to change. The Partnership has played a crucial role in cleaning and greening Saratoga Street and Park Avenue, luring in more retailers, and increasing the amount of nearby residents.



A prime example of a retailer new to the area is Guss Woolens, Inc. While the well-known fabric shop has called Baltimore home for nearly 100 years, it moved to 229 Park Avenue, just off the intersection of Park and Saratoga, only two years ago.

"There's more people in this area and more foot traffic than in some other areas of the city," store co-owner Mike Marsh says while through fabrics. "I'm optimistic of retail growth here if our surroundings continue to improve."



Guss Woolens, Inc. joins more than 50 businesses located between the 100 Block and 400 Blocks of Saratoga Street and the 200 and 400 blocks of Park Avenue. They make up a diverse set - from law firms to shoe repair stores, barbershops to fabric shops, churches to clothing stores, delis to nail salons.



Filled with character, and locally-owned, Grandma's Candle Shop at 227 W. Saratoga Street is a prime example of the type of business found in the area. For more than 20 years, the store has carried everything from holy water, to spiritual advice, to kits to remove curses.

"People should come and see what's happening here in this area," says Retail Manager Kim Wolfrey. "They'd be pleasantly surprised at what they'd find."





Dimensions in Music

Another key element that defines Saratoga Street and Park Avenue is the mix of old and new. While more and more businesses are moving in, several of the retailers, like Grandma’s Candle Shop, have called the area home for decades. Despite the struggles they’ve faced over the years – or perhaps because of them – these retailers remain fiercely loyal to their surroundings.

Dimensions in Music, a three-story store filled to the brim with old records, albums, and CDs, has called 233 Park Avenue home for 15 years. The shop is frequented by fans from across the country is known by music aficionados around the world.



Larry Jeter at Register

“This area has history and character,” store President and CEO Larry Jeter says. “It doesn’t compare to an area full of chain stores. There’s great customer service and more of a sense of community here.”

That community is beginning to include not only businesses and retailers, but restaurants as well. With Chinese restaurants opening up on the 200 and 400 block of Park Avenue, it’s rumored that that block could one day be resurrected as the Chinese center of Downtown.



Saratoga Street Condos

And, with the Superblock development planning process closer than ever, it’s only a matter of time before that area Downtown – roughly bound by Lexington, Howard and Fayette streets and Park Avenue - becomes an anchor of development and activity in the Westside.

“We’re excited here about the progress to come,” Jeter says. “This place could be really happening.”

Meanwhile, Downtown Partnership has more money than ever to help business improve the appearance of their storefronts. Thanks to an increase in funding from the City and State, the Façade Improvement Program now has \$450,000 in grant money to allocate this year and 2011. That’s more than twice as much as last year.

And Downtown Partnership will soon unveil a program designed to help retailers move into small, vacant ground-floor spaces along Charles, Calvert, Gay and Lexington streets. The program has \$90,000 in grant money to spend on minor improvements to the spaces before tenants move in.



Saratoga Street

“We already have the building blocks for success here: loyal and supportive retailers, a great community, and streets that are looking better and better each day,” Fowler says. “Now it’s time to capitalize on those strengths and move forward in our efforts to create a wonderful Westside.”