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In the Region/Long Island; Changes Continuing at Hempstead Shopping Area

 By CAROLE PAQUETTE
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THE success of the first phase of a major \$65 million redevelopment project -- the Hub at Hempstead -- has officials hoping that the village's downtown area is on the way to regaining some of its past glory as "the hub of Long Island."

The new 232,000-square-foot Hub retail center is on 28 acres of a 42-acre area that is ultimately to be developed into a 410,000-square-foot retail complex. The \$35 million center, which broke ground in 1999, is fully occupied, with 10 national retail stores ranging from a 3,000-square-foot General Nutrition Center to a 135,000-square-foot Home Depot.

Village officials express confidence that completion of the Hub's next five phases will restore an area that was Long Island's major shopping district before the advent of nearby giant malls in the 1960's. "We want to maintain the downtown as the hub of Long Island; there is no sense in reinventing the wheel," said Hempstead's mayor, James A. Garner. "It always was the hub of Long Island, and it always will be."

Located in the heart of Nassau County, Hempstead is a 3.7-square-mile, 149-year-old village with more than 60,000 residents. It has the largest population of Long Island's 64 incorporated villages and is the seat of government for the town of Hempstead.

The Hub is on Fulton Avenue -- one of the village's main thoroughfares -- at the former site of a 520,000-square-foot, four-story Abraham & Straus department store, which had been abandoned for 10 years before it was demolished in 1998.

"Over the years, the property had deteriorated and its value gone down," said Glen L. Spiritis, the village's commissioner of community development. "With the redevelopment we're getting back to the good old days."

Before 1998, the property accounted for \$1.3 million in annual tax revenue. This year, the Hub center is expected to generate \$11.7 million in new taxes, including \$10.5 million in sales tax.

The "good old days" covered a span of nearly 50 years going back to the 1930's, when the village was known as "the hub" because it was a major transportation center with both train and bus terminals. National retail giants like Arnold Constable and Robert Hall as well as numerous restaurants and small retail stores were located along Fulton Avenue. The parking lots were at the rear of the buildings.

"People came from all over Long Island," said Wilbur Breslin, a developer who grew up in the village. He is president of the Breslin Realty Development Corporation of Garden City, which is building the Hub complex in partnership with Fred Colin of the Manhasset-based Colin Management Company and with Starwood-Ceruzzi, a development company in Westport, Conn.

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My father had the only food market in the village," Mr. Breslin said. "I remember when they built Roosevelt Field. I said, 'This is going to be big competition,' but my father and a lot of the other old-timers pooh-poohed it and they didn't do well after that."

Eventually, Hempstead's major retail tenants moved to the malls, leaving the downtown with large vacant buildings that deteriorated over the years.

Taking down the antiquated buildings, Mr. Breslin said, was a key step in redeveloping the area -- "not because they are in poor shape, but because they are of the wrong configuration." It was necessary to have the parking lots in front of the buildings, within 350 feet of the front door, he explained.

"That way customers could do their business in one stop," he said. "Once we could give the tenants the facility they required, we could lure them to Hempstead."

Upon taking office in 1989, Mr. Garner's administration prepared a new master plan for the village. A new bus terminal, Long Island Rail Road station and 400 units of affordable housing were built. Dilapidated buildings were torn down and new shopping centers, like the Hempstead Commons on Peninsula Boulevard and Franklin Avenue, were created.

In 1994, Mr. Breslin proposed redeveloping the Abraham & Straus site with new buildings that would have parking in the front, and in 1998, with Starwood-Ceruzzi as its partner, Breslin Realty purchased the property and demolished the building to begin Phase 1 of the Hub.

The Hub's developers received an \$11 million low-interest federal loan for acquisition and construction costs. Because the center would provide 750 new jobs and generate millions in taxes, the Empire State Development Corporation, the state's economic development agency, agreed to provide some financing, according to Charles Gargano, its chairman. "Mr. Breslin had received a \$24.3 million first mortgage, and we closed the gap with a \$2.7 million 10-year second-mortgage loan," he said.

"The closing of A.&S. really had a deleterious effect on the area," Mr. Gargano said. "The Hub project has not only enlivened the property but the entire community."

The new jobs have helped the village's real estate market, according to Audrey Livingstone, owner of Century 21 Annettes Real Estate in Uniondale. Ms. Livingstone, past president of the Long Island Board of Realtors, a trade organization, has been selling houses in the Hempstead area for 23 years.

Houses in the village currently range from \$245,000 for a four-bedroom Cape Cod to \$310,000 for a colonial. Prices have increased by approximately 10 percent over the past year and "now seem to have stabilized," Ms. Livingstone said.

"The economy played a part in the increase, but the refurbishing going on in the village hasn't hurt," she said. "It is bringing a lot more buyers into the area. The job situation is better and now that they have the work, they are moving in."

Phase 2 of the Hub project, which is expected to begin early next month involves a two-acre site on the eastern boundary of the completed Phase 1 portion. Ground has been broken for the \$10 million project, which involved razing several buildings, including a five-story office building, to make room for the construction of a 25,800-square-foot retail building. Two of the three spaces have already been rented. A Chuck E. Cheese restaurant will occupy 11,300 square feet, and Danice, a women's apparel shop, will have 4,000 square feet.

The remaining four phases of the Hub are in preliminary marketing and planning stages, with the village considering condemnation of some buildings, Mr. Spiritis said.

According to Mr. Breslin, the third phase is to include a five-acre site at the eastern end of the Hub that now holds 12 one- and two-family residences and a two-story building housing Off-Track Betting. If the approximately 75-year-old houses are demolished, the residents, most of whom are renters, would be relocated.

The OTB building, which was once occupied by an Arnold Constable department store, will remain, but two wings that had been added will be torn down, leaving the original 30,000-square-foot building, Mr. Breslin said.

"I remember it as a kid -- it was a good-looking building," he said. "It is made of steel with a stucco finish that needs to be restored. We will bring it back to life again."

ALSO included in Phase 3 could be the demolition of the 90-year-old 10,000-square-foot apartment house on High Street where Mr. Breslin lived when his parents first came to Hempstead 60 years ago.

As part of Phase 4, a vacant building on 1.2 acres on the western end of the Hub, which was once owned by Kaufman Carpet, may be razed, Mr. Breslin said.

The fifth phase involves a one-acre vacant lot across from Sacred Heart Academy that is currently used as a student parking lot.

In the sixth phase, two buildings on less than one acre, could be razed because they interfere with the visibility of the Stop & Shop supermarket that is across the street. One building houses a pharmacy whose customer list has been purchased by the supermarket and which is closing. The other building is a 30-unit four-story apartment house with no parking, Mr. Breslin said.

While it is not yet known what kind of stores would be built in Phases 3 through 6, the entire Hub complex is expected to be completed by 2005, Mr. Breslin said.

And, then?

"We are ultimately planning to expand to one million square feet in an easterly direction crossing Franklin Avenue to Main Street," Mr. Breslin said.