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## Vacancies Spark Grassroots Movement

By John Golden

Craig Pellis, who owns Silver Spoon Catering on Mount Kisco's East Main Street, decided to hear what organizers had to say, and to have his say, at the first meeting last month of Occupy Main Street. Started by two Mount Kisco women with their own small home-based businesses, it is, not unlike the more political protest movement that inspired its name, a still amorphous grassroots initiative driven and connected by social media.



Maria Colaco, left, and Sarah O'Grady, organizers of Occupy Main Street in Mount Kisco.

"I walk down to the meeting," Pellis said, "and I pass five former stores – everything from a toy store, Borders, a clothing store, an art store." Real estate brokers' signs hang in the windows of the empty shops, a common sight on the Main Streets of Westchester since the start of the recession in 2008.

With national retail tenants that had the capital resources to keep their doors open, "I think downtown Mount Kisco may not have felt the pinch as early as everyone else did," said Jonathan H. Gordon, president and CEO of Admiral Real Estate Service Corp. "Now it's feeling it a little bit." His Bronxville brokerage currently represents 11 retail stores and four offices for rent in Mount Kisco.

Of the empty stores, most conspicuous is the see-through space of the 21,500-square-foot corner building on East Main Street that still bears the signage of Borders Books and Music. Borders was a destination store for northern Westchester residents and a local social hub – whose displaced society has added to business and made morning seating a precious commodity at the downtown Starbucks. From the mayor to the broker to the caterer, all agree the bookstore's closing last October has had a major impact on shopping traffic and businesses in Mount Kisco.

"These are stores that are not coming back to town," Pellis said. "It's a whole different world that we're living in. People are going on the Internet and buying things."

The caterer said much the same at the March meeting organized by Sarah O'Grady, a freelance copywriter and branding consultant, and Maria Colaco, a dance choreographer and social media consultant. The pair traces the origins of Occupy Main Street to a round of drinks last November at a popular Mount Kisco restaurant, the Flying Pig. The chef told them the restaurant was closing at the end of the year because of a high rent increase. (Colaco said the Flying Pig's owner is looking to reopen at a new location.)

"At Flying Pig, it all just sort of clicked for us," O'Grady said. "It really just hit home, how big this problem was."

She and Colaco started a Twitter conversation that soon was joined by an architect, artists and a former commercial landlord. Residents of Pleasantville and Armonk shared their communities' success stories and what was done to support businesses. Residents of Larchmont and Irvington complained of retail vacancies and high rents in their communities.

The movement now has a Facebook page, Occupy Main Street – Westchester County. For the two organizers, “We’ve concentrated on Mount Kisco as our focus only because we live here,” O’Grady said.

“For us, the saying ‘Occupy Main Street’ is so literal – to see all these empty storefronts and merchants who complain about the lack of traffic and how slow things are.”

“That led to, how can the town be supportive of this? How can the town be progressive?”

“We’re also encouraging residents to take a stand in their communities,” Colaco said.

O’Grady said their message to Mayor J. Michael Cindrich and other Mount Kisco officials has been, “We want to do this together. We want to cooperate on this. Everybody needs to play in the sandbox together.”

“The action wasn’t happening,” Colaco said. “We can all talk ’til the cows come home about what action needs to be done, but who’s going to do it?”

**Cindrich and Gordon see more positive signs in Mount Kisco.**

**Gordon said his retail brokerage has closed on 25,000 to 30,000 square feet of leased space in the last two quarters. Those deals include Petco’s fourth-quarter lease of a 10,000-square-foot store on Route 117 that CVS vacated.**

“The restaurants are doing very well,” Cindrich said. “It’s wall-to-wall.”

“You can’t order food on the Internet,” the mayor added. “Right now the small retailer is competing – and it’s tough competition – with online merchants.”

**Gordon said two restaurants and two retailers have signed leases for his clients’ downtown space. One tenant is Tommie Copper, the maker of therapeutic compression athletic wear.**

**“We’re seeing much lower asking rents from the highs of 2006 and 2007,” Gordon said. “I advise my clients to try to price their properties a little bit below what market rent is” so as to attract more than one interested prospect.**

**According to Admiral Real Estate’s market research, average rental rates in Mount Kisco fell to a two-year low in the third quarter of 2011, at about \$24.25 per square foot. In the recently ended first quarter this year, rents climbed to nearly \$26.50 per square foot.**

**“I think Mount Kisco specifically is going in the long run to be fine,” Gordon said. Despite encouraging signs, “We’re still going to sort of lag along until the Borders space is leased.”**

Carl Austin, a broker marketing the Borders building, said the owner, Property Group Partners in New York, wants to keep the space intact for a single occupant. “We have been discussing with a lot of tenants,” including Barnes & Noble, though no lease deal is imminent, Austin said.

“We’ve been through this cycle a number of times,” said Cindrich, who said much the same at the Occupy Main Street meeting. “It’s a cyclical phenomenon.”

Occupy Main Street's organizers and supporters don't share the mayor's view.

"Times are a-changin'," Colaco said. "This cycle of might mean the end of it."

Pellis at his catering shop said Mount Kisco should follow the examples of Port Chester and White Plains and open its downtown to residential development situated near the village train station.

"Why not build an apartment building on top of Borders Books? It's time to bring in young families and make this a vibrant town and bring in the types of businesses that are really going to make this town flourish."

"I think it's time for us to stop fooling ourselves that these stores are going to be replaced by what's been here in the past."