

## Catonsville downtown is one of Baltimore County's most stable

### Old 'streetcar suburb' takes advantage of location, history

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Ned Atwater grew up in Catonsville, attended the local schools and still lives in the southwestern Baltimore County community. The owner of several cafes and bakeries in the area has brought his business home to Catonsville's downtown, and is supplying the stretch of Frederick Road with coffee, cakes and redolent aromas.

Atwater has converted a late 19th-century post office into a cafe and a commercial bakery. He employs 30 workers and supplies breads, cookies, pies and sweets to Atwater's other locations around the state. He savors the small-town ambiance, the steady stream of pedestrian traffic and the camaraderie with other business owners, he said.

"It's also nice to be part of something that is accessible to everyone and something that feels like it has been around forever," he said.

All along Frederick Road, new businesses are opening and mainstays are refurbishing. The vacancy rate for retail from the Baltimore City line west to Rolling Road is about 1 percent of the nearly 760,000 square feet of available space, said Peirce Macgill, revitalization specialist with Baltimore County's economic development office. In similar areas of the county that rate averages about 7 percent, he said.

"It really is an anomaly in this economy, but business in Catonsville is going really well," Macgill said. "Maybe it's because of the pent-up demand from a community that always felt it had to go elsewhere for everything that is now in its backyard."

Catonsville, one of Baltimore County's older areas, is also one of its most stable, said Bernadette Hanlon, research analyst at the Center for Urban Environmental Research and Education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

"It evolved as a streetcar suburb and UMBC helps to anchor it," Hanlon said. "It is also close to major transportation corridors, but those are not in its face. With its sustainable character, this revitalization is likely to continue."

Atwater started his restoration with a \$60,000, low-interest loan from the county. He opened in January in the two-story brick building, with a façade of ornate black molding, that was the town pharmacy in his youth. In the past few years, Catonsville has attracted shops, offices and enough new or expanded restaurants to establish its own restaurant row.

Jim and Sharon Andrews bought a run-down tavern on Frederick Road eight years ago. He called himself "homegrown and committed to this community." Five expansions later, Ships Cafe is a

neighborhood fixture that served patrons who arrived on snowmobiles and skis during last winter's snows.

"Baltimore County has really helped us out all along the way," Jim Andrews said. "Catonsville has become a true destination point and people are comfortable coming here."

The county is helping him once again with the purchase and razing of vacant warehouses that Andrews will convert into a parking lot for his patrons.

While Jim Himel, vice president of the Catonsville Community Conservation Association, would like more parking, he wants any publicly funded spots open to everybody. The county is also working on more public spots, which would be metered.

"If my tax dollars are going to finance a parking lot, I want to be able to park there, even if I am not patronizing the business," Himel said, adding he also wants large green parking signs posted to steer visitors to available spaces.

Parking and tight credit for businesses appear to be the few major hurdles to revitalization, which Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski and County Executive James T. Smith Jr. praised on a recent tour of Catonsville. They promised to help keep the business boom going.

Mikulski said Catonsville's proximity to UMBC and its research facilities also make it an ideal location for contractors moving to the area as part of the nationwide military base realignment known as BRAC.

Kirby Spencer, a commercial real estate agent, said her latest inquiry for office space came from a tech company that wanted to be near the university but not on campus.

"Communities like this are creating great energy," she said. "Three years ago, there was no foot traffic, now you see people up and down the street."

A Sunday farmers' market and a Friday night concert series are also drawing crowds to downtown.

"We get a lot of the walkers and the diners, who just come in to browse and buy," said Sue Slagle, who works at Objects Found, a consignment shop that moved to Catonsville from Oella two years ago.

Catonsville Gourmet opened a few years ago after the owners converted a vacant hardware store into a restaurant, a project so successful that many called it the catalyst for revitalization.

"That one restaurant got people thinking about coming downtown again," Macgill said. "It helped show residents that they can live the city lifestyle and walk to downtown from their homes."

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