

Plainfield pins economic hopes on department store's rebirth

BY JENNIFER GOLSON
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

It was once a jewel in the Queen City's crown, and Plainfield residents still tell stories of its luster.

Tepper's department store had carpeted floors, elevator operators in white gloves and merchandise that would rival Macy's or, some say, even Saks Fifth Avenue. But financial hardships forced the owners to close the store in 1977.

Other closures followed, and downtown Plainfield became a tarnished shell of its former self.

"It was once the symbol of commercial pre-eminence of Plainfield," said Deputy City Administrator Patricia Ballard Fox. "Then it became a pre-eminent symbol of blight in the city. Everybody knew the Tepper's department store was empty."

Yesterday, Plainfield, Union County and state officials stood amid paint chips and broken glass to inaugurate a \$10 million restoration of the former department store.

The Regan Development Corp. of Ardsley, N.Y., will convert the building into retail and residential space, a plan that was nearly 20 months in the making. The building has been in the city's hands since 1980, Fox said.

Mayor Al McWilliams hailed the event as a sign of a new beginning for the city.

"We're open for business in Plainfield," he said. "We're hungry for investment."

Plainfield has been hungry for decades. The downtown business district witnessed a gradual decline until Macy's closed in 1992. That was the final straw, said Frank Meeks III, a board member of the Central Jersey Chamber of Commerce.

"In its heyday, and immediately after the end of World War II, (Plainfield) was the main shopping point for central New Jersey," Meeks said.

Three factors helped seal Tepper's demise and that of downtown Plainfield, said James Hughes, dean of the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University.

"Certainly the riots in Plainfield,

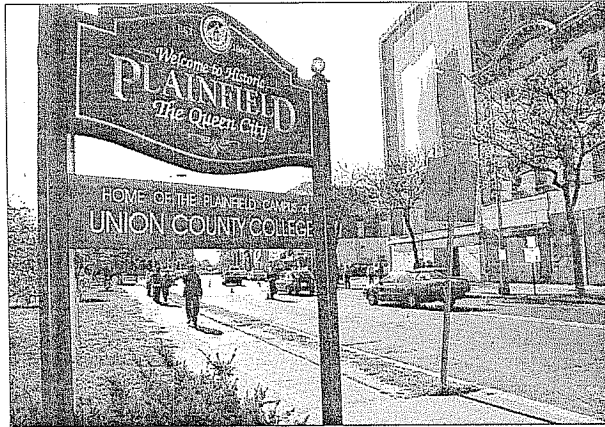


PHOTO BY RICH SCHULTZ

The former Tepper's department store on West Front Street in Plainfield is to undergo a \$10 million restoration by Regan Development Corp. of Ardsley, N.Y., to convert the building into retail and residential space.

in 1967, started some of the economic flight out of the city," Hughes said. "The 1974-1975 recession hit New Jersey very badly. It was certainly reflected in the retail sector in the state's cities. Then the impact of the increasing number of regional malls and highway competitors, again, I think was the final blow that really led to the downfall."

There was something different about Tepper's, said Jean Mattson, who worked there in 1945 after graduating from Plainfield High School.

With her first paycheck, "I bought my first pair of saddle shoes," Mattson said.

She left the city for a time, and returned in the 1970s, after Tepper's closed. "If they hadn't closed, others wouldn't have closed in the city," she said.

With other projects in the works — including a building on the Park Madison Green that will house county and state offices — Plainfield officials are hoping the downtown business district can return to its former glory.

The Park Madison Green is across the street from Tepper's and has been vacant since the 1960s. It became a park in the early 1990s.

Hughes said it will take a mix of retail, residential and office development for urban areas such as Plainfield to make a comeback.

Bringing new uses to old buildings is what Regan Development does best, company President Larry Regan said. The firm has done similar projects in Paterson and Orange. In Bayonne, the company is converting the Maidenform bra factory into senior citizens housing complex.

The Plainfield project will include retail on the first floor, and 60 percent of the space has been leased. Occupants will include a diner, an adult day care center, local retail establishments and "mom-and-pop businesses," Regan said.

The building will also house more than 70 apartments at below-market rents. Prices will range from \$475 for a one-bedroom apartment to \$750 for two bedrooms.

The project is receiving major financing from the state Department of Community Affairs and the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency, and that is allowing the developer to keep the rents low, Regan said.

The city is expected to sell the property to Regan Development for more than \$1 million before the end of the year. Construction will begin within the same time period and is scheduled to be completed by the spring of 2003, Regan said.

Jennifer Golson covers Plainfield. She can be reached at fgolson@star-ledger.com or (908) 322-2433.