

# Orange focuses sights on Central

## Plans highlight Peppermint site

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Orange municipal officials say they are making plans to transform one of the city's major avenues into an economic force.

While the city's primary business area is Main Street, Central Avenue has begun to see business development on previously long-vacant sites. City officials said last week they want the transformation to continue, and discussed one project they believe could begin in 2012.

The redevelopment of Central Avenue began several years ago when Essex County widened the roadway in East Orange, Orange and West Orange to four lanes. After that, said Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr., city officials moved to take advantage of the county's work.

"We have concentrated on the gateways to the city, one of them being Central Avenue," said Hawkins. "We made significant enhancements, such as improving streetscapes, redoing sidewalks, installing new lighting, not just for



Photo By John Zucal

The Peppermint Lounge on Central Avenue in Orange has been vacant for more than a decade.

aesthetics, but to enhance crime-fighting."

Anchoring the Central Avenue plans is the recently opened Grand Central apartment building at South Center Street. The four-story building is visible to drivers entering Orange from East Orange. Grand Central, which opened in September 2011, contains 70 affordable apartments.

Hawkins and another city official said the building's residents are

beneficial to the area now, and would continue to be in the future.

"This project is home to a large number of high-quality workforce housing, and it's one of our anchors toward revitalizing the area," said Hawkins.

As for the current status, Planning and Development Director Valerie Jackson said residents already contribute, utilizing the neighborhood businesses. Jackson said the city, with the aid of private



Rendering Courtesy Bleeker Associates/City of Orange

This rendering shows a proposed mixed-use retail building that would replace the demolished Peppermint Lounge.

capital, has invested at least \$60 million into the avenue.

One key area city officials said they want resolved is the former Peppermint Lounge, which has stood empty for more than a decade. According to Jackson, a developer is in negotiations to purchase the property, currently owned by the Love of Jesus Church in Orange. She said a plan to construct a four-story, mixed-use building, with four retail stores on the ground floor, has already received approval from the planning board.

"We've found residents want more entertainment-related businesses, such as a dining establishment, in that area," said Jackson. "We entered into a redevelopment agreement to demolish the structure and replace it with a 12,000-square-foot building with 26 to 30 market-rate apartments."

Hawkins said another reason he hopes businesses will consider locating in Orange is the improvement in housing. Besides the mentioned projects, 140 units of senior and mixed-income townhouses are

about to open on the site of the former Walter G. Alexander apartment complex, an area that was known for having a high rate of crime. It is located along Freeway Drive East, a walk of less than 10 minutes from Central Avenue.

"As this project is completed, the local economy becomes stronger and it becomes safer," said Hawkins. "It becomes easier to recruit commercial infrastructure to the area. Then, it can be more sustainable because there is a better infrastructure."