

## Businesses hurt by city's 'improvement'

Three blocks on 37th Road in Jackson Heights closed to traffic

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by Rebecca Ellis, Chronicle Contributor |

A strip of mostly Pakistani- and Bangladeshi-owned businesses have been uncharacteristically quiet recently. Overlook sidewalks full of litter and debris. The road itself is an island of new tables and chairs, often empty.

Since Sept. 20, when the Department of Transportation converted this Jackson Heights road into a pedestrian study, the businesses there have been struggling. The 15 clothing stores, Internet cafes and restaurants, stretching cater to immigrants from Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan.

Shopkeepers blame sagging sales on the road closing. They say that the lack of automobile access has caused their business elsewhere.

"I used to make over \$1,200 a day," said Nooruddin Dashti, who owns the jewelry store Al Qahhar. "Now it's all this since they closed the street."

Last week, the brightly lit shop was glaringly empty. The store's largest gem, a chandelier, cast light on the gold and silver necklaces, rings and beads were on view. A pair of earrings can go for \$100. But the day before, he could make a single sale. He added that he had not paid his employees in three weeks.

The typical rush on the weekend of Eid al-Adha, a Muslim holiday that took place in early November, was all that has fallen behind on his \$11,000 a month rent payments for the store and was unable to give to his Muslim Faith Community Center. The facility is run by Qazi Imam Mohd Qayyoom, who is, like Dashti, a long-time Jackson

"Two members of my congregation, they're supporting us. So last time when I went to their shop they were gone. Business is not good. They said, Imam, please do something for us, prayer, stuff like that, and I said, OK, I'm trying. I said over samosas at the Kebab King, a restaurant on 74th Street across from the 37th Road area.

Qayyoom came to the United States from Sylhet, a small town in Bangladesh, in 1991. He has seen firsthand how business has been hurting since the road closed.

"It hurts sales in other businesses and restaurants nearby that depend on each other," Qayyoom said. His congregation and community center have directly felt the impact.

"Today's the 11th and we didn't pay the rent yet, because we didn't collect on the money yet," Qayyoom said.

Shazia Kauziar, owner of Cafe K2, said she had experienced a 60 to 70 percent loss in sales since the road closed.

Compounded by the effects of the winter slump, sales have been less than \$60 a day, Kauziar said.

Cafe K2 has served Indian, Nepalese, Pakistani and Bangladeshi fare — like “chat,” a spicy dish with onions street for 18 years.

Kauziar joined the chorus of business owners struggling to pay rent.

“We are behind on our rent,” Kauziar said. She added that the road closure has made things difficult because finding parking is taking their business elsewhere.

“Owners are getting tickets from the Sanitation Department for the trash,” said Mohammad Pier, president of the Business Owners Association. “This is not good. We are impacted badly.”

Dashti was one shopkeeper who received a ticket from the DOS. On Wednesday, Nov. 9, just minutes before an employee walked up as Dashti was pulling jewelry out of a safe and placing it in the display window.

“They said that my sidewalk was dirty. But I just opened the door. It is not right,” Dashti said. He was fined \$

Many community members blame the trash problem on the recent influx of people who use the newly installed 37th Road. They say that the homeless, who sit at these tables and chairs outside their stores, leave litter and discourage business.

“[The homeless] bring garbage and drugs here. People don’t want to walk here early in the morning,” said M. Rashid, a 10-year resident of Jackson Heights. Rashid is a member of Imam Qayyoom’s congregation and is a friend of some of the area’s business owners.

Pier explained that there is only one opening to busy 74th Street from the now pedestrian three-block strip, which complicates access. Area businesses met with Councilman Daniel Dromm (D-Jackson Heights) and Congresswoman Gale Brewer (D-Queens, the Bronx) two weeks ago.

“Everyone is aware of the situation,” Pier said. But he questions what will be done about it after the six-month road closure. The central demand of the business owners was simply: “Re-open the road.”

Jack Friedman of the Queens Chamber of Commerce and Seth Bornstein of the Queens Economic Development Corporation organization had been contacted regarding the owners’ concerns.

Kathy Dawkins, a DOS spokeswoman, would not comment on the issue of business owners receiving tickets because 37th Road is a commercial strip, Sanitation does not have a responsibility to collect trash there.

And Nicole Garcia, a representative for the Department of Transportation, issued the following statement:

“As with all our projects, we continue to monitor the area, and have an ongoing dialogue with the community.”

further fine-tune this important safety and mobility project.”