

## A Retailing Czar, Looking Out for Mom and Pop

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National stores have gotten a lot of attention by moving into New York City neighborhoods that were once thought of in the retailing world as about as hospitable as the moon: Old Navy in Harlem, Ikea in Red Hook, [Target](#) in Flatbush.

But despite the headline-grabbing chain-store openings, the fact remains that New York City is dominated by locally owned mom-and-pop shops. This is particularly true in the outer boroughs, where small businesses play an important role in job creation, neighborhood identity and, for many immigrants, realization of the American dream.



Ting-Li Wang/The New York Times

Michelle Mooney, executive director of retail development, visiting a neighborhood in Brooklyn. Keeping small businesses strong is her job. in Brooklyn. Keeping small businesses strong is her job.

To keep the small-business sector strong and healthy in the face of competition from national and regional chains, Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) has created and filled a new position at the start of his second term: executive director of retail development. The person who holds the position has a primary goal of working with local community development corporations and business improvement districts to upgrade retailing in their neighborhoods. The office will be part of the Department of Small Business Services.

"We've been dividing up the community development corporation money, doling it out a little here and a little there, and it just wasn't helping anyone," said Robert W. Walsh, commissioner of the department. "What's been produced with that money is a lot of calendars, bad directories and tchotchkes. So we hired a specialist to oversee this."

The new retailing czar, Michelle Mooney, will assist neighborhood organizations in their efforts to attract and retain a diversity of businesses that serve local residents.

Focusing attention on the boroughs outside Manhattan, Ms. Mooney will also oversee two programs already in existence: improving storefronts and helping neighborhoods create retail identities to attract shoppers.

New York City has 53 business improvement districts, which represent many of the city's 200,000 small businesses — companies with 100 employees or fewer. These companies account for 98 percent of all businesses in New York City and approximately half of the private sector work force. They contribute about \$4.5 billion in tax revenues, according to information provided by the city.

Overseeing retailing in the city is much more complicated than directing a shopping center in the suburbs, experts say. "A mall has a global view, managing the mix of retail and making sure everything looks good," said Mark Newhouse, the deputy commissioner of small-business services, who hired Ms. Mooney. "But urban retail ownership is divided. It's much more difficult to manage that in a neighborhood, but it can be done a lot better than it has to this point."

One of the city's major efforts to help the new retailing development official is the development and introduction of a Web site that will have profiles of New York City's neighborhoods.

In addition to demographic information, each profile will list what types of businesses are located there and how many, which storefronts are for lease and how property owners can be reached. The profiles also offer information about an area's business improvement district (if there is one) and links to information about city programs that help small-business owners apply for loans and get other services. The Web site, to be called NYC Site Solutions, is expected to start this spring.

Before taking the job with New York City, which pays \$73,000 a year, Ms. Mooney, who says she is in her mid-30's, worked as the leasing officer for the Port of Long Beach in California, which bills itself as the second-largest seaport in the United States. Earlier, she was deputy director of community development for Cuyahoga County, Ohio, which includes Cleveland. She has a master's degree in urban planning.

Though she has been on the job only since the second week of January and does not yet have any pictures on her desk, Ms. Mooney is already steeped in New York City neighborhood retailing.

On a recent tour of Flatbush Junction, an area in Brooklyn that has a [Starbucks](#) and will soon have a Target, Ms. Mooney said she would help local retailers complete their application to form a business improvement district, the city's 54th, and then get to work with the organization to fill empty storefronts and clean up graffiti and street trash.

"People talk about curb appeal with residential real estate," Ms. Mooney said. "Well, the retail district is a neighborhood's curb appeal."

Flatbush Junction needs to make a better connection between small retailers, local residents and Brooklyn College, which is expanding its arts program, Ms. Mooney said. She said this was an example of the type of neighborhoods where she would be focusing her attention: places with transit hubs that were also experiencing shifts in demographics.

"Usually the disconnect between residents and retail happens when neighborhoods are in transition," Ms. Mooney said. "Sometimes properties are making money from other things and not from the retail, such as billboards. Second and third floors are often empty, and even stairways have been removed. If the upstairs were converted to residential, there would be even greater demand for a better mix of retail in the area."

One neighborhood group that made the transition to a successful business improvement district is the Myrtle Avenue Brooklyn Partnership. Having worked with the small-business services department in the past, the organization's executive director, Michael Blaise Backer, was encouraged to learn that there would be a new high-level specialist for retailing development.

"For groups like ours that are small with limited services, to have someone with genuine retail expertise who could advise us, that would be very helpful," Mr. Backer said. "We've been getting by without, but when we come up with a strategy, it would be great to have someone we can go to who isn't a broker to get a second opinion."