

Punching a Hole in Paradise

By JOSEPH BERGER Published: May 25, 2008

PLEASANTVILLE

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Susan Stava for The New York Times The Dunkin' Donuts site.

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upscale restaurants sprang up to feed hungry cineastes, folk singers could be found strumming guitars to the latte crowd at the nearby Dragonfly Cafe, and the Village Bookstore extended its hours until the night's last picture show.

Together, these amenities created an offbeat night life in a county where, some residents say, the villages roll the sidewalks up at dusk. They made Pleasantville stand out from towns that have permitted cookie-cutter franchises to gulp them up.

But it is hard to fight the commercial tide, and one chain store has made its way right across the street from the Burns. A Dunkin' Donuts is under construction at the corner of Manville Road and Washington Avenue and can't be stopped. But how it got there still upsets some residents.

"It's not that people don't think Dunkin' Donuts is good enough," said Roy Solomon, the bookstore's owner. "They buy Munchkins for kids' birthday parties. But it's a very brand-name presence in the middle of something that gives you the feeling of

THERE are moments when this village seems like the Village — the Greenwich Village of the 1950s and '60s, when you could grab what in those days was an exotic European beverage, a cappuccino, at a bohemian coffeehouse, browse the existentialist titles at an array of hole-in-the-wall bookstores and take in a foreign film at, say, the Bleecker Street Cinema.

What crystallized Pleasantville's Left Bank flavor in the heart of Reader's Digest country was the arrival seven years ago of the Jacob Burns Film Center, which shows foreign and classic movies and draws those thirsting for something besides multiplex fare. In the Burns Center's wake, two

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independent, unique stores scaled to the community.”

In late February, the village’s governing board declared a six-month moratorium on new building permits in downtown. That will give officials time to review zoning laws and possibly fix the loopholes by more clearly defining such enigmatic terms as “fast food.” They also plan to talk about how they might encourage retailers — not, say, banks — to locate in first-floor and corner storefronts.

In the case of the Dunkin’ Donuts site, the zoning classification permitted a bakery with eight seats or fewer, so the village’s building inspector, Michael A. Testa Jr., approved it as a permissible use without public discussion. Some residents suggest that Dunkin Donuts is a bakery the way that General Motors is a maker of horseless carriages; the truth is purely technical. Critics like Ben Serebin, a 31-year-old resident who owns a computer business in Manhattan, notes that doughnuts are fried in oil, not baked, and that the doughnuts for Pleasantville’s Dunkin’ Donuts are cooked in the Bronx.

The problem in writing zoning laws, Mayor Bernard S. Gordon says, is that the language can’t discriminate between a Dunkin’ and a Dragonfly. Fast food and franchise are wobbly terms, he said, so banning fast food might close a French bakery, and banning franchises could outlaw a hardware store that is part of the TrueValue cooperative.

Mr. Serebin, who has made researching zoning a second career, says the village should consider a ban on “formula” businesses, those required to have the same trademarks, menus, signage and other features at all locations. That strategy has been tried in Port Jefferson, on Long Island, in Portland, Me., and in several California communities.

Pleasantville, which a generation ago suffered from a plague of empty stores, does have chain stores — a Pizza Hut, a Carvel and another Dunkin’ Donuts. But those are on gateway streets like Bedford Road, not in a downtown quarter that aspires to become another Latin Quarter. The Dunkin’ Donuts, says Mr. Solomon, declares that the corner could be found in “Anywhere, U.S.A.”

It will be another link in a group of more than 30 Dunkin’ Donuts franchises, most of them in Westchester, operated by a division of the Beekman Group L.L.C., a Manhattan-based private equity group. Peter Marrinan, the division’s chief executive, said only that he would “not have much comment.”

The hostility to the new store is scarcely unanimous. Annette Colasuonno, who owns the Lil’ Chocolate Shoppe across from the Dunkin’, sympathizes with property owners who can’t be finicky about whether a tenant is a chain store or a mom-and-pop.

“Whoever owns a franchise is still a family person who’s working hard to support a family,” she said. “They make it sound like franchise people have a disease.”

But to Mr. Serebin, the intrusion of a Dunkin’ Donuts is more than just a matter of business — it’s a matter of village character. Mr. Serebin and his wife, Ali, moved here from Manhattan’s Upper West Side, picking Pleasantville partly because of its enchanting blending of the artsy and down to earth.

“A lot of people in the village don’t understand what they have here,” he said.

The New York Times



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