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It's eating vs. shopping on Charles

Baltimore Business Journal - by Julekha Dash Staff

Two new restaurants will move onto Charles Street this year as the area grows as a destination for drinks and dining.

Joss Cafe of Annapolis plans to open a second location in the former Kawasaki location at 413 N. Charles St. And Lumbini, an eatery serving Italian and Indian food, will open at 322 N. Charles St.

The changes have some store owners worried the area is losing its appeal as a retail destination and will be known only for its restaurants. Their fears were heightened with the planned move of two long-standing retailers from the city's most storied thoroughfare.

The William Baumgarten Stamp Co. is relocating from Charles Street to a smaller space at 1305 St. Paul St. on Feb. 11 to save money and the owner of Craig Flinner Gallery will move Feb. 23 to Hampden, lured by the area's greater concentration of retailers and better parking.

Part of the challenge for retailers is that the area is facing more competition from the city's emerging neighborhoods, including Harbor East, Hampden, the Can Company and Belvedere Square, for foot traffic and retailers.

Belvedere Square lured Nouveau Contemporary Goods from Charles Street in 2004. The spot remained vacant until Gian Marco Menswear relocated to that spot from 33 S. Charles St. two years later.

As other neighborhoods draw residents, it is less crucial for stores to remain on Charles Street to attract shoppers, store owners say. "As far as actual boutiques, there's not enough to keep a tourist interested to spend a day" on Charles Street, said Charisse Paige, co-owner of Bella Sorpresa Boutique. The lingerie store opened at 339 N. Charles St. in September. It replaced gift shop Rugged Roses that stayed in the 2,500-square-foot spot for a year.

The street gained several new tenants last year, including SuperFresh, Starbucks and longtime downtown tenant the Peanut Shoppe.

But Charles Street lacks a formal retail strategy and an anchor tenant that could draw the tourists who make their way from downtown to, say, the Walters Art Museum, said Bella Sorpresa co-owner Kevin Smith.

A plan for Charles Street retail is under way, said Robin Budish, executive director of the Historic Charles Street Association. The group is working with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Charles Street Development Corp. to identify the area's retail needs and then work with retail brokers to fill the empty spaces.

"We are taking this head-on," Budish said. "We are addressing this issue."

Budish said she would like to see a hardware store, jewelry store and shoe store among the retail mix.

Recognizing greater competition from other neighborhoods, the Historic Charles Street Association recently hired a marketing firm to promote the area as part of a five-year, \$250,000 branding initiative.

Business owners like Sandra Long, owner of Charm City Cupcakes, say the area has the potential to compete with the city's other retail spots.

"I'm still a believer in the renaissance of Charles Street," Long said.

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