



The New York Times

JANUARY 6, 2003

You Think Traffic Is Jammed on the Belt Parkway? Take a Look at Aisle 9

By NICHOLE M. CHRISTIAN



Along the notoriously backed-up Belt Parkway, traffic is crazier than ever.

Blame Exit 15, where an old eyesore, a 230-acre Brooklyn landfill, has been transformed into a \$192 million shopping mall. With its own exit ramp and a lineup of retailers that includes Target, Bed Bath & Beyond, Old Navy and the Home Depot, the Gateway Center has become a big-box retail wonderland.

Few will admit it without goading, but some shoppers say they can practically hear the stores' calling out to them, indeed forcing them off the Belt Parkway, right into the mall parking lot.

It is that difficult to resist them, shoppers claim, and even harder to believe that Gateway, a sleek, sprawling suburban-style strip mall bigger than 10 football fields, is in East New York, a stretch of Brooklyn often considered better bypassed than visited.

"There was nothing here before," said Pete Confresni of Queens. "You wouldn't even bother to look. Now you can't get near the place some days. The traffic, it goes back as far

as Exit 9 sometimes."

Only recently has Mr. Confresni come to view the mall and the traffic created by its arrival as good. When Gateway opened in September, Mr. Confresni said he mostly sat in traffic watching with a commuter's contempt as car after car made its way toward Exit 15.

He vowed he would not be sucked in.

On New Year's Eve, though, Mr. Confresni gave in, lured by the promise of cheap DVD's at Target.

"If you're criving out here on the Belt every day, you can't help but see the traffic it's getting," he said somewhat defensively, standing in Target's entertainment section, debating with his daughter Chloe, 12, and son Nick, 4, about whether to buy the 10 recordings they had selected.

"It's close to home, too," Mr. Confresni added. "It gets a little hard to resist the convenience."

Several of the mall's retailers say that type of thinking has so far kept the cash registers at Gateway humming. Just what that means in actual sales is unclear, since retailers avoid discussing specific numbers, but Gateway's typically packed parking lot and the crowded aisles of the stores themselves offer clear evidence of the mall's popularity.



"Being out here along the Belt has definitely been good to us," said John Zeoli, the manager of the Home Depot, now the chain's largest store in Brooklyn. "We're exceeding our sales goals, and we're seeing over 19,000 customers a week. They're coming from everywhere — Crown Heights, Howard Beach, the Rockaways, Ridgewood."

Bari Fagin, a spokeswoman for Bed Bath & Beyond, said her company had been as surprised by the reception given to its first Brooklyn store as by the mall itself.

"Who would have thought this would have come out of the sand off the Belt Parkway?" said Ms. Fagin, a frequent traveler on the Belt Parkway who for years had watched the old landfill go undeveloped. "It's an exciting place to be. It's easy to look at, easy to access — one-stop suburban-style shopping in an urban Brooklyn setting."

Around East New York, Gateway has become synonymous with more than just discount prices and pretty buildings: it is a place to find a job in a neighborhood where economic opportunities can be hard to come by.

As promised during Gateway's initial development, the project created

about 1,700 jobs, the bulk of them filled by people from the neighborhood, said Glenn Goldstein, a senior vice president in charge of Gateway development for the Related Retail Corporation, the mall's developer.

The Home Depot, for example, hired 200 of its 248 employees from around East New York. And sales at the store have been so robust that an extra 25 neighborhood residents have been added to the payroll, Mr. Zeoli said.

Tyrone Salazar, 33, an assistant manager at the store, said, "It's a good thing to be able to get a job right here in the neighborhood — a job with benefits, not some mom and pop place way off in the city."

Along with the added jobs, the mall is expected to bring in \$40 million in annual revenue for the city and state, based on a combination of income, real estate and sales taxes, Mr. Goldstein said.

"The more people that get off the Belt and come here, or to Target or one of the restaurants, that's another chance for another job to be created," Mr. Salazar said. "You give people here a chance to work, maybe you create a reason for things to happen all over East New York, not just out at Gateway."



Photographs by Kirk Condyles for The New York Times

Anchor stores like Target have helped make Gateway Center, a strip mall that opened in September in East New York, a retail beacon.