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New Haven County retail Rte. 1 corridor showing signs of life

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The Boston Post Rd. from the West Haven line to the Connecticut Post Mall in Milford has long been known as one of the busiest and most desirable retail corridors in the state. Known as the "Miracle Mile", it has been a destination for shoppers from around the region. This stretch, also referred to as "Furniture Row" because of the heavy concentration of home furnishings retailers has been undergoing a transformation during the current economic downturn. Following the housing collapse, we have seen the natural progression of many of the home furnishing retailers deteriorate with stores such as Wayside, Linens N' Things, Drexel Heritage, Domain and several other local operators closing their doors. This, of course has left a large void of available retail space. This trend, combined with the closings of other national and regional retailers on the stretch such as Circuit City, CompUSA, Golfer's Warehouse, etc. has left an unprecedented amount of vacancy in this area. The outlook has not been promising over the last 12 months, as it seemed that there was a store closing almost every week. The prospects for new tenants has been poor with few businesses looking to backfill the vacant space. Over the past six months, it had seemed as though a "perfect storm" of sorts had hit this sector. The backbone of the area (home furnishing retailers) had been dealt a severe blow, other national chains that are suffering or have sought bankruptcy protection were failing, and local operators feeling the economic crunch have been hurting. This, combined with credit being hard to come by and on top of it all, one of the worst winters we have seen in several years has made for a bleak retail climate with activity almost at a standstill.

However, Hope Springs Eternal! The most important factor to any retail corridor that has not diminished on this stretch is consumers. The average daily traffic count along Rte.1 is still strong averaging upwards of 25,000-30,000 cars per day. The patrons have continued to support more value-type businesses, with department store anchors such as Target and Wal-Mart solidifying both ends of the Boston Post Rd. Additionally, family and value-type restaurants, including both national chains and local establishments, have been some of the biggest benefactors of the high traffic volume and desire for consumers to escape the dread of winter. In fact, the national chain restaurants in this area have traditionally boasted some of the highest producing units in their respective chains, including Outback, Olive Garden and Chilis.

With the continued flow of consumers, optimism towards the end of the recession and last but not least important, beginning of spring, we are seeing signs of life. There have been several announcements and developments recently which have brought a great amount of optimism. Last year's redevelopment and reuse of the former Volk Printing building (a run-down 80,000 s/f manufacturing building) was a major win for the area. The building has been completely renovated and now is home to Pilgrim Furniture. Chase Bank has finalized a deal to locate at the most desirable and most visible intersection in Orange - the corner of Rte. 1 and Rte. 114; that project is expected to break ground very shortly. Additionally, Whole Foods has announced that they will open

by the end of the year as the long awaited anchor at The Milford Marketplace, the area's first upscale lifestyle center. There have also been several other prominent store openings over the past few months, including a Bruegger's Bagels, My Gym and Tengda, an Asian Fusion/Hibachi restaurant in the Milford Marketplace. The retail activity level in the area has definitely increased over the last few weeks, with several other prominent chains and operators inquiring about coming to this market. Of course, the biggest boon for this area is still in limbo. The development of a Stew Leonard's store off exit 41 has been stalled for the last few years when opponents appealed a Planning and Zoning decision to approve a new store on Marsh Hill Rd. Unfortunately, delaying this much needed anchor has hurt many Rte. 1 businesses in Orange and Milford. With hopefully the worst behind us, the outlook for this market remains bright. With benefits such as direct access to I-95, favorable demographics and strong traffic counts, the Rte. 1 corridor should continue to flourish for decades to come.

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