

Shuttered Shops Dim Some East Hampton Retailers' Holiday Cheer

By [Amanda M. Fairbanks](#) | December 24, 2015 - 3:44pm

On the Monday before Christmas, downtown East Hampton was a veritable ghost town. Between Main Street and Newtown Lane, more than a dozen businesses had empty storefronts. Such shuttered businesses, when strung together and nestled side-by-side, echoed an eerie quiet during an otherwise festive and frenzied time of the year.

"It's a seasonal community," said Hal Zwick, director of commercial real estate at Town and Country, whose contact information hangs in the windows of several vacant shops. "The more expensive the store, the less business there is apart from the height of the season."

Mr. Zwick confirmed that the recent closures of Ricky's NYC on Main Street and Haute Hippie on Newtown Lane resulted from "corporate bankruptcies. It's nothing to do with our environment here. We're in a good economy now."

Ereka Dunn, who directs publicity for Ricky's NYC, declined to comment.

Besides its East Hampton location, Haute Hippie recently closed three other brick-and-mortar stores. A call to Jesse Cole, Haute Hippie's C.E.O., went unreturned.

"Whether leasing or buying, retailers are being a little more cautious about what they'll pay because of the seasonality," said Mr. Zwick. Three-to-five-year leases, he said, favor the national, corporate retailers who can afford the steep rental costs. And, he said, larger stores, such as the temporary Newtown Lane location recently vacated by J. Crew, are more difficult to lease, with most retailers preferring 1,500 square feet or less.

East Hampton stands in stark contrast to Bridgehampton and Sag Harbor, where empty storefronts are rare and sidewalks generally seem more festive.

"The cost per square foot is half," explained Mr. Zwick. The greatest demand for commercial space now is in Sag Harbor Village, he said, where "nothing is available."

"We've done it to ourselves. The village has allowed it to happen, and it's horrible," said Valerie Smith, who has run the Monogram Shop on Newtown Lane for the past 18 years. "No one is walking around. Everyone is in Aspen and St. Bart's. The idea of spending the Christmas holidays out here is obsolete."

For those still looking for a dose of holiday cheer, Ms. Smith recommended a visit to Job's Lane in Southampton; specifically, Stevenson's Toys and Games and the Topiaire Flower Shop, where gift-wrapping and shoppers abound.

Katie Slowey, who has worked at Top Drawer Lingerie on Park Place, East Hampton, for the past five years, said her store attracts destination shoppers but rarely draws window shoppers casually stopping in to browse.

"There's no place to shop," lamented Ms. Slowey, pointing to the empty parking lot. She misses the sight of holiday shoppers hauling multiple bags, balancing cups of hot chocolate. "Everything is closed, so there's no incentive to come and browse around town because there's nothing to peek at."

Megan Chiarello opened the first Gloria Jewel boutique in 2007. She has since opened five stores and splits her time among branches in Amagansett, East Hampton, Bridgehampton, Westhampton Beach, and Tribeca. Despite challenges with midweek foot traffic, she said loyal South Fork customers routinely stop in, knowing that each location is open every day, year round.

"Main Street feels really different from Newtown Lane, where everyone is open," said Ms. Chiarello, whose store on Newtown sits sandwiched between Clic and James Perse, both year-round retailers. "We're all outside sweeping our walkways, sharing customers. It's our little community."

In Bridgehampton, she mentioned a recent "holiday stroll" organized by Garnet Hill, which banded together local retailers. Ms. Chiarello suggested that a similar event in East Hampton might spark a greater sense of community, particularly among small-business owners.

Nancy Rowan, who owns the Golden Eagle, an art supply store on Newtown Lane, has witnessed a sea change in downtown East Hampton since she was a child.

"Because there are so many corporate-owned businesses and they close up for the winter, there's no foot traffic anymore," said Ms. Rowan, who has operated the Golden Eagle in two separate locations for the past 15 years. "You can't come to town and shop if the stores are all closed. It's very impactful on small businesses."

