

Why aren't there more stores in Ocean County?



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Barbara Wyciskala used to live in Cranford in Union County, before moving to the adult community, Renaissance at Manchester, 13 years ago. But there, in that northern Ocean County community, she found no convenient shopping close to home. At least, not like what she was used to.

If Wyciskala wants to go shopping, she says she has to drive to Freehold Township, or to her daughter's home in Union County.

"I visited my daughter who lives in Westfield and I felt like I died and went to heaven," Wyciskala said.

"People (residents) want some newer, fresher, things here," Wyciskala said. "I think they (developers) feel that there is no money to be made here."

(Photo: THOMAS P. COSTELLO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

But reasons including demographics, money, and a changing retail industry have discouraged some store chains from surging into Ocean County, while neighboring Monmouth County enjoys a wider variety.



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Judy Santilli, Jackson, packs her car after shopping at the Costco on Route 70 in Brick Thursday. (Photo: THOMAS P. COSTELLO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

Seniors vs. Millennials

"The real race now is for millennials. You hear that in everything, (like) TV or movies that's where the action is," said Robert Conrad, lecturer of marketing, management and finance at LIM College in New York. "Is Ocean County per se from a demographic standpoint a place where millennials reside? It's always had that perception of being that place where people retire."

Indeed, Ocean County's population does track older (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/34/34029.html>).

Twenty-two percent of the population is over 65, versus 16 percent of the population in Monmouth County (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/34/34025.html>), according to 2014 data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

"(A) factor with Ocean County is the inordinately high percentage of senior citizens, (which) sometimes doesn't meet certain criteria for where retailers want to locate," said Matthew Casey, a supermarket analyst based in Clark. "Seniors tend to shop more and spend less. ... If they're shopping in a store more often, it's more labor to serve that customer."

Seniors go into stores more, but buy less per transaction than other age groups, Casey said.

"There was a Grand Union many years ago in Toms River on Route 37 — that store had the highest weekly customer count in the entire chain — sometimes some seniors went twice a day — but had the lowest average basket or transaction size in the entire chain."

There is a successful ShopRite in Manchester, Casey said, that does serve mostly seniors.

However, the community would like to see some diversity with a specialty store such as Trader Joe's, Wyciskala said.

ShopRite has a strong presence in southern New Jersey, Casey said, which is another reason why other chains might not want to open in the area.

"Probably the biggest reason is the strength of ShopRite. It's very difficult to go head to head with ShopRite," he said.

Still, Trader Joe's is a "unique store," so it might have a shot, Casey said.



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Population density

Some demographics that retailers consider when determining where to expand involve population density, income level and full-time versus part-time residents, said Joel Naroff, of Naroff Economic Advisors (<http://naroffeconomics.com/>) in Holland, Pennsylvania.

"The biggest thing is density. You know, if (people) are more spread out, it's tougher to have as many businesses," Naroff said. "If you have something that is more spread out, you're not going to be able to support as many stores. That's why you have lots of stores in a town compared to a more rural area."

Ocean County had a population of 586,300 in 2014 and has a land area is 628 square miles, an average of 934 people per square mile, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

In comparison, Monmouth County had a population of 629,279 in 2014 and the land area is 468 square miles, an average of 1,345 people per square mile.

Statewide, New Jersey has almost 9 million residents, a land area of 7,354 square miles, and 1,196 people per square mile.



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Judi LaForgia, Toms River, packs her car after shopping at the Costco on Route 70 in Brick Thursday. (Photo: THOMAS P. COSTELLO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

Income

The median household income is also lower in Ocean County versus Monmouth County.

In Ocean County, the average household income from 2009 to 2013 was \$61,136, about \$10,000 below the average for New Jersey. In Monmouth County, the average was \$84,526 according to the Bureau.

Wyciskala argued that business can do well in Ocean County, as evidenced by the Costco shopping center in Brick.

"We've got a nice Costco and that store is booming, the place is so packed you can hardly get a parking spot," Wyciskala said.

Still, that's not "around the corner."

"I mean, Brick is a thriving town, anything new seems to go Brick. Nothing seems to go anywhere else," she said. "We feel like it's (Manchester) a forgotten area."

Other stores in the shopping plaza that houses Costco include a Christmas Tree Shop, Dick's Sporting Goods, Turning Point restaurant, Staples and a Houlihan's restaurant. That center, and the other shops on Route 70 in Brick, are 30 minutes from central Manchester. Similar shopping destinations can be found in the county seat of Toms River, home of Ocean County Mall, and farther south in Stafford, the town many vacationers travel through on their way to Long Beach Island.

"Once you get to a certain size, certain types of stores are supportable," Naroff said.

"You get these smaller town centers, they used to be called strip malls. ... They're structured a little differently," Naroff said. "When the larger stores (anchor) they will expand the market area, and smaller stores can take advantage."

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Carts are pushed through the parking lot in the Costco plaza on Route 70 in Brick Thursday. (Photo: THOMAS P. COSTELLO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

Department store model

But what about more retail? Wyciskala said she'd like to see a department store like Lord & Taylor move into town. The high-end retailer has stores in Freehold Township's Freehold Raceway Mall and Eatontown's Monmouth Mall. Similarly, a Nordstrom is in Freehold Township, and a Nordstrom Rack – its off-price subsidiary – is in Eatontown. Ocean County has neither.

Unfortunately, department stores aren't necessarily doing so hot – their model is outdated, said Conrad.

"In truth, the department store channel, if you will, has been flat to down for a number of years. Even stores like Nordstrom's: they've touted their growth, but not as an expansion of Nordstrom's, but as an expansion of the Rack stores and the online business."

Last year, Macy's announced the chain was closing 36 stores, and last month said they will lay off 4,350 employees across the country. The stores in Freehold Township, Eatontown and Toms River are staying open.

"Between America's love affair with discount malls; full price department stores ... it's just not an attractive model anymore," Conrad said.

"Also keep in mind, this country is over-spaced in retail. You've got the whole Internet explosion ... I mean the market is only growing by 2 or 3 percent," he said.

But an outlet mall, not a full department store, might do well in southern New Jersey, specifically near Stafford off Garden State Parkway exit 63, in Conrad's opinion. Ocean County does boast Jackson Premium Outlets, at the northern end of the county, literally across the street from Monmouth County.

"It would make sense on a lot of levels. There's more people with money moving there. ... You've got the LBI traffic, it's still exit 63, 40 miles from Tinton Falls and still another 25 from Atlantic City," he said. "I see that as a model that might work, and you could get your dose of Saks Off Fifth."

Sadly, the aging department store model, the reluctance of supermarkets, and the general demographics of Ocean County don't make it any less cumbersome for Wyciskala and her neighbors to reach the retailers they want.

"The idea is we just wish they (companies) would come and take a look around see that we do have a lot to offer," Wyciskala said. "Really, we deserve better than what we have. In this community we have more New Yorkers than everyone else."

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