Property Owners Spend on Quality of Life (But Is That Fair?)

A local business improvement district has helped revive Hudson Square, a once industrial area near the Holland Tunnel.

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Benches, crosswalks and shade trees have transformed a once-barren stretch of Manhattan near the Holland Tunnel into a welcoming neighborhood known as Hudson Square.

In Harlem, a free mobile app has served as a 24/7 virtual concierge connecting residents and visitors to shopping, real estate and landmarks. And rat-prevention efforts in Brooklyn Heights have kept trash and unwanted four-legged guests from lingering.
Thirty-three of the city’s 73 business improvement districts have emerged since 2000. The first was formed in Union Square in 1984. The districts vary in size and operation, and they must be authorized by the city through a multistep process that typically takes two years and requires support from property owners, businesses and residents in that area, officials said.

Kathryn Wylde, president and chief executive of the Partnership for New York City, which represents many of the city’s business leaders, said that these districts were initially formed when the city government had fewer resources to support struggling neighborhood commercial areas.

“BIDs provided local leadership and services that were formerly absent or haphazard at best,” said Ms. Wylde, whose group was an early supporter of the districts.

Since then, Ms. Wylde said, these districts have functioned as an “extension of city government,” providing a way for local commercial property owners to organize and pay for improvements to their communities.

But Moshe Adler, an economist and adjunct professor at Columbia University, said that the city’s network of business improvement districts had created an inequitable system in which those who live and work in affluent neighborhoods have access to better services, such as more frequent street cleaning.
“A government should provide the same quality of service to every citizen,” he said. “This is the purpose of government, why we have government to begin with.”

Across the city, business improvement districts are looking for new ways to support their neighborhoods.

The Montague Street Business Improvement District in Brooklyn Heights has supported a campaign by city health officials and the local community board to prevent rodent infestations by going door to door to make sure its 100 businesses have regular trash collections.

After a recent water main break closed part of the street, Kate Chura, the district’s executive director, hired workers to pick up food scraps from businesses rather than wait for regular trash service.

In Harlem, the 125th Street Business Improvement District has deployed “ambassadors” with walkie-talkies to assist pedestrians — an average of 950,000 a month — on this main artery packed with stores, restaurants, delis and offices. But to better connect with them and promote the neighborhood’s offerings, it introduced an app, Harlem Happenings, in November 2015.
The app has been used more than 40,000 times, said Barbara Askins, the district’s president and chief executive. The $25,000 cost to develop Harlem Happenings has been largely recouped from savings on print advertising, Ms. Askins said, because the district now directs everyone to the app.

“It’s much cheaper, plus you can talk back and forth with the people who are interested,” she said.

The Hudson Square Connection was formed in 2009 to revive an industrial area once known as the printing district, said Ellen Baer, the group’s president and chief executive. It has spent millions making the neighborhood more hospitable, including hiring traffic managers to direct cars and pedestrians at busy intersections and installing an award-winning green infrastructure system that has allowed more than 250 trees to flourish on sidewalks.

Today, Hudson Square is home to many new residents, as well as media, marketing, advertising and technology companies.

“There it was, a no man’s land nestled among SoHo, TriBeCa and the West Village,” Ms. Baer said. “Now it’s everyone’s land.”

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