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Retailers look forward to car-free Broadway

By Adrienne Pasquarelli

JSunday will usher in a new, car-free era for sections of Broadway in Times Square and Herald Square, as part of the city's initiative to curb congestion on streets and sidewalks, and many hope the changes will also increase business for area retailers.

The thoroughfare, from 47th Street to 42nd Street and from 35th Street to 33rd Street will be closed to all vehicles, becoming a pedestrian walkway featuring chairs and benches.

"Having a larger pedestrian space where people are lingering is good for their business," said Tim Tompkins, president of the Times Square Alliance neighborhood business improvement district. He noted that a 2008 survey the Alliance conducted showed that the number one drawback of Times Square was too many people on the sidewalks.

More people might visit the area and spend at area retailers if the walkways are extended, Mr. Tompkins said. Already about a half million people are in Times Square each day.

These days, retailers need all of the help they can get. Ann Taylor Loft, which has a store on 42nd Street and Broadway, reported a 21.9% same-store sales decline for its most recent quarter. Foot Locker, which is farther north on the strip, registered a 7.2% drop, and the Gap saw same-store sales fall 10% in April.

Farther south in the 30s, retailers applauded the change and anticipate more business.

"This will target the problem of vehicular and pedestrian gridlock in the area while sustaining business growth," said a Macy's spokeswoman. "This pilot program will hopefully make Broadway more dynamic and more inviting."

However, experts agree that there will be kinks to iron out. Some worry that retailers or restaurants on Broadway might have problems with receiving deliveries of inventory and food. In addition, since vehicle traffic will be rerouted to Seventh Avenue, more congestion might occur initially as drivers learn about the changes.

"It's going to take at least a year for people to realize Broadway is not available—it'll be a headache for a while," said Brad Schwarz, a broker with Sierra Realty.