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NOT IN STORE ANYMORE

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There was some excitement back in October 2007 when Harlem soul food restaurant Amy Ruth's signed a lease for the old Gage & Tollner space in Downtown Brooklyn's Fulton Street Mall. For an area not exactly overflowing with sit-down dining options, an outpost of such a beloved Manhattan institution was a big deal.

Two years and one global financial crisis later, though, Amy Ruth's isn't coming to Fulton Street anymore. What's going to occupy the spot in its place? An Arby's.

The former Gage & Tollner location isn't alone in not living up to expectations in the area. During the real estate boom, new condo buildings such as One Hanson Place, Belltel Lofts and Oro opened nearby, bringing with them thousands of square feet of street-level retail space. But retail tenants haven't arrived yet.

Most notably, One Hanson announced in 2006 that a Borders bookstore was on the way. When that didn't happen, there were rumors of a Gracious Home and an Apple store. None of this materialized, and One Hanson's 15,000-square-foot ground-floor space is now being rented for weddings and other special events.

Bridge Street's Belltel Lofts has similarly flirted with national chains since putting its 39,000 square feet of retail space on the market last year. The building was in discussion with Starbucks, says Lawrence Lee, vice president at Prudential Douglas Elliman's Bracha Group, which represents the space. But no deal was reached, and Belltel is now looking for a locally owned lounge, restaurant or small grocer.

Gold Street's Oro, which has been marketing its 4,000-square-foot retail space since the beginning of this year, is also pursuing the possibility of a local eatery as its tenant.

"We've had interest across the spectrum," says Paul Rich of TerraCRG, the Oro's space's representative, "from your basic kind of Greek diner to more hip restaurants."

In the current Downtown Brooklyn market, small and local is the easiest (and in some cases, perhaps the only) way to go, notes Caroline Pardo, director of leasing at Two Trees Management, which owns numerous buildings in DUMBO and beyond.

"I've been getting many, many, many more calls for our small spaces,"

she says. "There are definitely more mom-and-pops looking right now than big national tenants."

Lee agrees. "We've reached out to a lot of larger [national tenants], but a lot of them aren't looking to expand right now," he says.

Which isn't to say there are no national names interested in Brooklyn.

Pardo says Two Trees has been talking to national furniture and clothing retailers about a large space available at 200 Atlantic Ave.

And Prudential Douglas Elliman broker Faith Hope Consolo says she's involved in discussions with American Apparel and H&M about locations near the Flatbush Avenue Extension.

Even with the slowdown, the area has seen several new spots open over the last year. Roger Fortune, senior vice president/real estate at the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, cites a Steven Alan clothing store at Hoyt and Atlantic, a Morton's steakhouse at Adams and Willoughby, and the Brooklyn Fare grocery store at Hoyt and Schermerhorn. The latter, in addition to selling gourmet groceries, features five-course "chef's table" meals prepared several nights a week by Cesar Ramirez (formerly of Danube, Bouley and Bar Blanc).

As for the Fulton Mall Arby's, Fortune is a fan. "I think it's a good use of the space," he says.

Well, those curly fries are addictive.