

Business leaders see upper Union Street as a model

By Kathleen Mc



Virginia Mick of Saratoga Springs, left, and her sister Marilyn Anderson of Rotterdam toast before dinner at Scotti's Restaurant and Pizzeria on upper Union Street in Schenectady

SCHENECTADY — Department stores downtown dwindled and died, but upper Union St survived.

There, Salamack's, Gershon's Delicatessen and Simon's Men's Wear flourished with doz of other retailers even as the downtown collapsed and General Electric's work force fe from 47,000 to 3,000.

When the city's resurgence began, half the stores downtown remained shuttered durin renovations. But upper Union Street business owners were still going strong: They start sprucing up their storefronts and holding festivals to draw in more customers.

Now business leaders from other neighborhood corridors are looking at the booming str in hopes of duplicating Union's success. Metroplex Development Authority Chairman R: Gillen has announced that he plans to focus this year on those corridors, using upper Union as a model.

Upper Union Street's festivals, decorations and facade improvements all came about after the business owners created a business improvement district in 2001. Michael Mastroianni of Michael's Shoe Service proposed the idea because Union Street wasn't doing quite as well as it had in the past.

"I'm third generation in the family business," he said. "I came back up here, and, well, it's a sign of the times, but in my father's time, there were never any empty storefronts here."

He didn't think the street was in serious trouble. It wasn't anywhere near as empty as the downtown, for example. But it could be better.

"Union Street has always held its own," he said. "We needed marketing and branding."

focus on service

Mainly, he felt the street still had a lot to offer — if anyone knew it was there.

"It's only been in the last year — or two at the most — that when someone says upper Union Street, this is the only place they think of," Mastroianni said. "They know they're going to run into small business owners running their own business."

And while a small business owner might not have the name recognition of a Foot Locker, Mastroianni argues that custome would prefer the upper Union Street stores if they tried them.

"You can't make it in, you need half an hour, give us a call and we'll stay open for you. You can't get that at the mall," he said.

Promoting the district wasn't hard — but it was expensive. It would need far more than the business owners could gather asking each other for voluntary contributions, Mastroianni said.

In a BID, the city collects an extra tax from each property owner and funnels it into the organization's coffers. While the leadership sets the tax rate, the City Council must approve the budget.

It took two years to create the upper Union Street BID. It includes 61 properties across six blocks on Union Street and rur on \$44,000 a year.

“That’s the fuel that runs the engine up here,” Mastroianni said. “We never could’ve branded it the way we did, just with sheer economics, with a small business group.”

Once the business owners had banded together and begun to run annual festivals to market the district, Metroplex Development Authority offered some aesthetic help. The agency, which is funded by a portion of the county’s sales tax, now spent \$650,000 on facade improvements in the upper Union Street district.

The business improvement district also paid for almost all of the architectural designs, which facade program manager A Savage said was necessary to ensure that the new facades turned out beautifully.

new facades

“You wouldn’t get that quality of product if there’s not an architect on staff,” she said. “Business owners are very busy running their own business.”

The architects not only help design a cost-effective facade, but also create the detailed construction documents, post the project for bidders and call certain contractors to make sure they know about the project. Once bids come in, they review the proposals, recommend a reliable contractor and negotiate the contract.

“It’s absolutely full service,” Savage said.

And it’s usually free to the business owners, because the business improvement district pays for architectural fees up to 10 percent of the total project cost.

“Most projects don’t come to that. Most applicants get their architectural services for free,” Savage said.

Sixteen building facades have been renovated, with private owners investing over \$850,000. Savage is happy with all of the finished facades, but she said the Union Aquarium facade had the most impact on the aesthetics of the street.

She was impressed by the transformation to a sophisticated storefront.

“Where would you rather shop?” she said, comparing before and after pictures.

The pet store once had just a white wall broken only by a small window. The old door looked like a residential entrance, except for the step up – for which there was no step. Since the door was also the same color as the front wall, it faded into the background and was not easy to find.

Now Union Aquarium, and Hunan Wok next door, have large, framed windows, with the moldings painted white and the small remaining wall space painted grey. Both have new doors, framed in white and purple.

diagonal parking

They had to get rid of their roof signs, which are no longer allowed, but the new signs on the front wall are far easier to see. Both signs are now incorporated along the entire length of the businesses, in raised gold lettering.

The entire facade was rounded out with matching red awnings, giving the building a more sophisticated air.

There were several “unimpressive” facades on Mastroianni’s list when he walked the streets with Gillen, pointing out key targets for the facade program. All of those storefronts have now been renovated, with Savage’s good-natured prodding. It was her job to call up business owners and encourage them to apply for a matching grant.

Now that most of the unimpressive storefronts have been transformed, new BID President Guy Sementilli is focusing on his customers’ feet.

“We’re not just talking about old people struggling up the sidewalk,” he said.

“People have trouble pushing baby strollers down some of the sidewalks.”

There’s also very little parking. City officials have proposed a solution to both: cut back the sidewalk and create diagonal

parking instead of the current parallel parking.

“The property owners are going to lose a little sidewalk but I think they’ll be OK if they get two or three more spaces,” Sementilli said.

attitude of city

He’s worried that even though the proposal is in the city’s new comprehensive plan, it won’t get done because it would be expensive.

“We just have to figure out how we’re going to get the monies to do it,” Sementilli said.

“We don’t want to be put on the back burner again. It has to get done.”

He’s still irritated by what he describes as years of benign neglect from the city while the downtown got all the attention and funding.

“The city said, ‘You guys are fine up there, you’re doing well.’ But I don’t want to see business fail up here and then they help us 10 years after the fact when this area is a ghost town,” Sementilli said. “The key word is ‘city.’ If the city was just downtown, that’s fine. But all the people heading up Route 7, they’ll see us first.”

Still, he agrees the district is doing well without more help from the city.

“They can tout downtown all they want,” he said. “Through the years, upper Union Street has been the vibrant district in the city. We’ve always been a stable community up here.”