

The place to be

Despite economy, downtown Downers Grove a popular destination

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By **DAVID SHAROS** For The Sun

There was a time when downtown Downers Grove was considered one of the hidden jewels of the western suburbs. But these days, evidence is mounting that the secret is out.

About a decade ago, village officials drew up a strategic plan to help capitalize on its downtown commuter train station by re-creating a feel of small town America.

Greg Bedalov, president of the Downers Grove Economic Development Corporation, said the strategic plan forged back in 1999 included a three-prong approach, which included infrastructure, a residential component and, finally, businesses.

"The EDC focuses on global marketing, and we work to attract and retain businesses," Bedalov said. "My job is to bring people downtown and put Downers Grove on the map. People like the small town feel we have and the unique shops that aren't found at the big strip malls. And we're excited because our downtown is becoming a destination for people."

Linda Kunze, manager for the downtown Downers Grove Management Corp., said a Tax Increment Financing district, which was established to provide development incentives for the area, "has been performing well" and has helped add density to the downtown through a number of residential and mixed use projects.

"Developments like 'Morningside' along with 'Station Crossing' and 'Arcadia on the Green' have brought people who are downsizing along with others back into the downtown district," Kunze said. "We've tried to take advantage of our train service, as Downers Grove is the last stop on the express line to Chicago, which means people can be there in about 25 minutes."

Studies have shown that most downtown redevelopments require about seven years before they begin to recapture benefits from the renovation, but Kunze said that Downers Grove seems to be ahead of the curve.

"There are a few more steps we're looking to take, but people love what we've done down here, and our unique retailers just bend over backwards to give people great service," she said. "About 90 percent of our businesses are family owned."

Owner Mario Olivi, who launched the Olive Tap about two years ago, said the uniqueness of stores in the downtown area, as well as the service, has helped to create "a terrific downtown."

"People come into my store, and we don't just sell them olive oil," he said. "We also tell them how to use it to make their meals better. We have recipes and the knowledge about what we sell. The same is true for places like the knitting shop (The Knitche) where women can come in and sit, drink coffee and knit. They offer lessons and magazines and patterns. They don't just sell you a skein of yarn."

Newcomer Lisa Koma, a longtime Downers Grove resident, opened Candy Bear Lane just a few weeks ago in mid-July. She said Friday night car shows and the recent sidewalk sale event have helped generate foot traffic, and that comments she has heard suggest residents are committed to spending their money locally.

"People seem glad to have a candy shop in town for the kids, and I've heard people say they want to support the downtown businesses and want to come down here," Koma said. "I've always liked our town and the Main Street area."

Veteran business owners also like the changes they've seen. Maureen Grand and partner Leslie Rinaudo operate Style Studio, a store offering home furnishings and accessories that has moved three times in order to add more space. Grand said the store opened five years ago, and that people continue to come to Downers Grove looking a more personal approach.

"A lot of shoppers are tired of malls, and they like the home town feel we have here and see this as a friendlier way to shop," Grand said. "The village itself has done a great job to bring people down here for events and create foot traffic. We have a few more needs as far as shops go, but things have worked out well for us here."

Kunze cites a hardware store, a bike shop and a men's clothier as possible target businesses to be added to the downtown mix. She added that a grocery store soon will become a reality, thanks to Bedalov and the EDC, which has now landed in The Lemon Tree, scheduled to open in September.

"We heard that the Lemon Tree was considering other locations outside the downtown, and we approached them with a three-party deal that included a sales tax rebate to get them to move downtown," Bedalov said. "This acquisition enhances our desire to make us a destination for people."

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