

With holidays looming, local merchants pitch shopping in town

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By Dorian Block, Globe Correspondent | November 20, 2005

'Tis the season for crowded shopping malls. "Jingle Bells" piped through overhead speakers. Brawls over the last Tickle Me Elmo. Lines that rival Fenway Park's ticket queues.

Local downtown business owners have a message for shoppers: Malls are no way to celebrate the holidays.

"It's generic merchandise. It's crowded. You can't find someone to wait on you," said Carol Frederick, co-owner of Arlington's Coyote Impressions.

"Here there's a sense of being in a neighborhood, which I think a lot of people like. Everybody isn't rushing from one place or another," said Jan Whitted, owner of nearby Artbeat, the Creativity Store. "When you walk in, you feel more at home."

Several of Massachusetts' and New Hampshire's most vibrant downtowns bring out all the bells, whistles, and strings of lights they can find to attract residents to their stores during the make-or-break season of the year. They band together in hopes that the holiday cheer will help businesses, which make as much as half their annual sales in the four weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Doug Fleener, a Lexington resident and author of "The Profitable Retailer," a book just off the press last week, said stores are preparing for and encouraging holiday shopping earlier this year. He held a workshop for Lexington and Arlington businesses right after Halloween, on the topic of rallying for the holiday season.

"For most businesses the holidays are crucial for the total year's results," Fleener said. "Black Friday [the Friday after Thanksgiving] was the first day when businesses used to get in the black. Hopefully retailers are in the black before then, but in any case holidays can be anywhere from 25 to 45 percent of their sales."

Downtown merchants throughout the region are gearing up for the holiday push.

In Concord, for example, the Chamber of Commerce sponsors Holiday Open Houses on two Thursdays in December. Businesses stay open late, while a parade, carolers, and strolling musicians march through the town center.

In New Hampshire, 20,000 people are expected to flock to Nashua's twelfth annual Winter Holiday Stroll on Nov. 26. The same day, residents in Derry will enjoy a Very Derry Holiday, an event that mixes shopping with children's activities, and the town's annual holiday parade and tree-lighting ceremony.

For the first time this year, Arlington's newly energized Chamber of Commerce is also planning a shopping blitz called Shop Arlington First Lights weekend. Going further than many downtowns and trying to link the city's three distinct shopping areas, the chamber is bringing in gas-engine trolleys to ferry people from store to store, along with musicians and hot chocolate to lure residents to businesses offering free treats and special discounts.

Businesses hope that the event Dec. 1 through Dec. 4 will brighten up what can often be a slow and frightening beginning to such a crucial season.

"Sometimes there can be some really quiet times in early December and it's scary looking at how much you rely on it during the rest of the year," Frederick, of Coyote Impressions, said. "This year we'll have a nice increase to our business early on."

She said that the store, which she describes as being like "the Nature Company Museum Store with a Southwest flare," typically makes 60 percent of its sales in the one month of the holiday season.

Fleener said events like the one Arlington has planned give individual businesses the strength to combat mega-malls.

"There's power in numbers. When a downtown association doesn't work together, you've got 30 to 40 different retailers with 30 to 40 different retail ideas and marketing ideas," he said. "When you pull together, you have a bigger budget and bigger message to pull people in to compete with the malls."

Along with pulling together, Fleener recommends stores create an experience that differentiates them from a mall during the holiday season and reminds customers that they are there. Several store owners in Arlington say the key to their business in the holiday season is providing merchandise that is not available at a mall.

At Crossroads Trade in Arlington, owner Kate Harris orders gifts from artisans in dozens of countries as early as a year ahead of the holiday season. This year she has stocked the store with Nativity scenes from Peru, Haiti, and Kyrgyzstan, along with the countries of many of Arlington families' adopted children. She said she does about a third of her annual business in a three-week span.

Whitted, at Artbeat, said she also tries to set her store apart by encouraging people to make their own gifts, part of the theme of the creativity store. The store has a studio with materials for art projects and employees give out "recipe cards" for instructions to make homemade gifts and cards. During the Shop Arlington First Lights weekend, the store is hosting an "art tasting," with wine and chocolate, to complement the usual craft kits, desktop toys, and gifts at the shop.

Renuka O'Connell, who owns Divinity's Splendour-Glow, a fine-art and gift store, is similarly having a chocolate tasting to go along with the townwide celebration.

She said she has watched holiday shoppers come and go over her 26 years in Arlington. She believes that even if her store's handcrafted gifts do not draw residents into the downtown, principle should.

"I believe the enchantment of shopping one on one and talking to a human being and interacting with things made by artisans is so much more an enriching experience for the shopper and the people who work for a shop," she said. "The end result is our small towns have real stores and real services and won't be taken over by corporate America and won't be generic. It's really important that people try to support anyone who is trying to maintain the New England village center concept."

She said she agrees this year's first annual holiday celebration is a first step.

Meanwhile, Jody Gage, owner of Fortin-Gage, a flower and gift shop in Nashua, said Arlington is on the right track. He said Nashua's holiday celebration, sponsored by the Great American Downtown, the town's Main Street organization, is the downtown's biggest event of the year.

"A lot of people who are not from the area and not familiar with the downtown or people who don't get down to the downtown in their busy lives, it reintroduces them to the downtown," Gage said. "It's excellent. It's worked all around."