

# How A Small Town Saved Its Downtown

By W. W. EDGAR

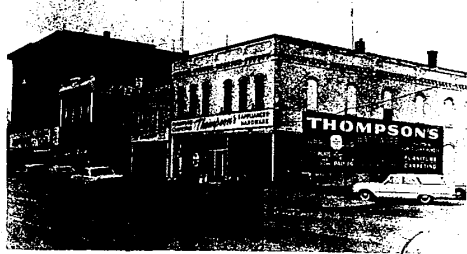
Hundreds of small towns across the land are faced with the problem of deteriorating downtown business sections.

For years they served the public well, and in many instances the general store was the focal point where the citizens gathered to discuss the events of the day.

Within the past decade, however, the small town business community was dealt a double blow. First, it was the network of super-highways that in many cases by-passed the smaller communities. And second, the advent of the shopping centers and the enclosed malls on the perimeter proved more attractive than the old-fashioned groceries and dry goods stores.

AS A RESULT many of these small town business sections are fighting a losing battle, and the struggle to save them has become a national problem.

Communities such as Plymouth, Garden City, Farmington and Westland have been studying plans and listening to all kinds of suggestions that are designed to remedy the deteriorating conditions.



THIS WAS Main Street before transition. (Port Huron Times-Herald photo)



THESE OLD buildings gave way to riverside promenade.



GEORGE L. THOMPSON He had a dream

But it has remained for one small town—a town that admittedly was "shying on the vine"—to show the way to solve the problem. And in doing so the little town of St. Clair (pop. 4,800) has become the beacon of hope for the small town merchants.

Within the past three years, this little hamlet, 50 miles north of Detroit on the St. Clair River that was known only as the site of the famed St. Clair Inn, has been transformed from a badly deteriorated area to a thriving new city that boasts a modern shopping mall, a riverfront promenade and a large marina.

The transition has attracted national attention and

scarcely a day goes by that the community isn't visited by some group—often from far away places—eager to learn how the "impossible dream" became a reality.

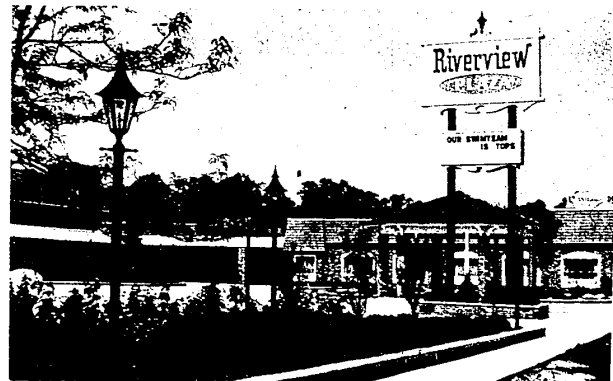
"IT REQUIRED a lot of hard work, courage and optimism on the part of a group of dedicated persons," George L. Thompson, president of the Riverview Plaza Corporation, relates as he sits in the palatial office of his furniture store that serves as the centerpiece of the modern facility.

"There were times when a less courageous group may have become discouraged," he explained, "but we rode

out the storms and now, so far as we know, we have accomplished something that no other community in the United States has succeeded in doing."

This "impossible dream" consisted of tearing down 49 acres of small business and residential buildings in the very center of the community and replacing them with a modern shopping mall comprising 31 stores, a promenade along the St. Clair River and the construction of a 160 boat marina.

How was all this accomplished? "FIRST," Thompson pointed out, "the community and the business leaders re-



THIS MODERN shopping center is now center of "new" city. (Times Herald photo)

ognized the need for a revitalization of their downtown area. Most housing was below code requirements and was in sub-marginal condition.

"Business was on the decline and we were accumulating more and more empty buildings. We also had a parking problem along with the threat of shopping centers on the outskirts."

"In face of this our group, dedicated as it is, stuck to the idea that the downtown should be kept as the central business district."

"Secondly, our goal was accomplished by careful planning, dedication and co-operation by a combined group of merchants, the City Council, City Building Authority, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the St. Clair Progress Corp."

"We decided, from the start, that we would keep the development among ourselves, instead of looking for an outside developer. It was our idea, to protect our local merchants and the individual citizens."

He explained that the St. Clair Progress Corp was a local non-profit development company, so stipulated by the City Council. It also was stipulated that existing local merchants be given the opportunity to relocate in the newly developed area, at lowest cost, and permitted to own their premises if they wished.

WITH THIS in mind, the group went to work and held countless meetings, many of them at 6:30 in the morning. When the plans were finalized, the shopping center was to contain 31 stores and mall with adequate parking. In addition, other facilities such as banks, gas stations and

professional buildings, auto agencies, senior citizens housing, restaurants and a 160 boat marina were planned. The marina was added to take advantage of the scenic beauty of the river.

Having plans was just the start of the realization of the dream.

"We had our share of headaches," Thompson said, "and most of them concerned the problem of financing the project."

The chief of these came when the city of St. Clair was taken off the distressed area list and made ineligible for further government funds from the Economic Development Association. This was caused by the decline of unemployment in the county.

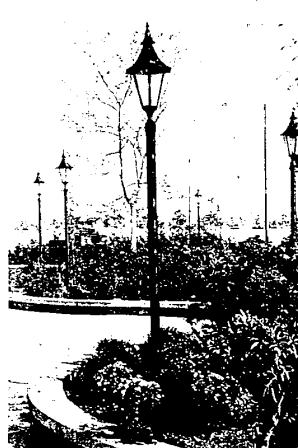
"We had received a grant of \$5 million from the urban renewal agencies and had the entire 46 acres cleared of the old homes and deteriorated commercial buildings," Thompson half-smiled as he sat up a bit straighter in his high backed chair.

"What to do now?"

INSTEAD of becoming discouraged, the dedicated group resolved more than ever to get the job done.

According to the Plaza President, arrangements were made for private loans, additional money came from foundations with generous help from the Small Business Administration.

"We needed \$5 million," he said, "and the SBA couldn't handle all of it under its limitation of \$350,000. To meet this emergency, the single project was divided into 31 individual projects and the loans arranged through the Small Business Administration. And the Marina was made possible by a



NATURAL beauty adds to new charm.

cooperative venture with the Michigan Waterways Commission."

The task is about complete and the real benefits now can be counted.

"We have solidified our downtown tax base," he explained, "and it is now triple that of the days before construction. It now amounts to approximately \$6 million in valuation."

"OUR INNER city has been kept together. Retail business, according to SBA released figures, has more than doubled. Our stores are larger and have more ad-

quate inventories. New residents are moving in and the city has become more beautiful and a more desirable place in which to live."

"But, more than that," Thompson concluded, "we have proved that concerned citizens, cooperating with state and federal agencies, can work together to improve their community."

Working with Thompson in the dedicated group were such outstanding leaders as John C. Coburn, Franklin H. Moore, John Emig and Raymond Dellen. "They made the 'impossible dream' come true."



**Guess who I woke up with this morning?**

Frank Sinatra  
At exactly 8:05 A.M. Which is when my clock-radio goes off every morning. Good, honest music . . . it's such a delightfully refreshing way to wake up every morning. Instead of a D. J. pummeling away at you. Tomorrow I'm hoping for Burt Bacharach. I bet he's great in the morning too.

**wiid AM 1090**  
Fewer commercials and very sexy music

## Operations Director

# ONI Promotes Levine

Fred J. Levine was named operations director of Observer Newspapers, Inc., in an announcement made today by Publisher Philip H. Power.

As operations director, Levine will be responsible for day-to-day direction of operations of the advertising, production, business and circulation departments of the Observer Newspapers.

Levine was previously advertising director. "Any organization growing and developing as fast as ours needs a man to handle and coordinate day to day operations on the business side," Power explained.

LEVINE, 31, was born in New York City. He received a BA in advertising from Michigan State University in 1963 after service in the U.S. Army Medical Corps (1959-60). Prior to that he had attended City College of New York.

At Michigan State, Levine was advertising manager of the Michigan State News, the student newspaper, and was a member of the senior men's honorary society, Xcalibur.

He pursued graduate work at MSU in management and advertising from 1963-1964, and then became classified advertising manager of the Miami Beach Daily Sun.

Levine joined Observer Newspapers, Inc. in 1965 and served as classified advertising manager until 1968, when he was made advertising director.

"In Fred Levine, we have a man of enormous experience in the suburban newspaper business in this area, as well as a person of great skill and imagination."

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"There no longer is the necessity of standing in line or enduring any kind of a wait."

"I have two sons, Scott, 3, and Todd, 1. Levine is a member of the International Newspaper Promotion Association, Association of Newspaper Classified Advertising Managers and serves on the board of Michigan Newspapers, Inc., an affiliate of the Michigan Press Association.

Observer Newspapers, Inc. is Michigan's largest twice-weekly newspaper organization, publishing newspapers in Livonia, Farmington, Southfield, Plymouth, Westland Township, Westland and Garden City.

A SOUTHFIELD resident, Levine and his wife, Carol, live at 29445 Ashley Court.



FRED J. LEVINE