



Scott Colburn offers specialized items and service to customers in his downtown Farmington saddlery. (Staff photos by Harry Maethe)



Joanne Fliss shops in her Kid's Corner.



Jean Carpenter helps Lucy Vance in Lucy's Oldies but Goodies, Farmington.

Downtown shops are luring customers back

When downtown shopping returns to vogue, Farmington merchants will be ready to take care of their prodigious customers. They're spending time and effort to lure shoppers back to the hometown buying habit.

For specialty shops clustered in the row along Farmington Road and Grand River, the days of downtown shopping are slowly returning.

Downtown Farmington merchants credit the city's revival effort and their ability to render personal service as the means of their survival through the mall era.



Wynell Brown offers Indian jewelry.

"Our center is a community center," said Ed Balden, president of the Downtown Farmington Center.

"It tries to give personal service. We're involved in the community. People relate to this," he said.

In his shopping center, the Sanders candy store employs know the names of their customers, Balden said. It's that sort of personal touch that is missing in the huge malls.

In THE Village Mall, Lucy Vance, of Lucy's Oldies but Goodies can claim that she knows which of her customers collect old cups and saucers, and which clients prefer wicker baskets.

"I know what everybody collects," she said.

Her customers are far from satisfied with the malls where "the same old dress shops" hold sway.

"A lot of people that come here wouldn't go into a mall for their Christmas shopping. There's too much walking. It's too crowded," she said.

In contrast to what some see as the predictability of the malls, Mrs. Vance tries to keep her customers guessing.

"They never know what to expect next. People shopping at the Farmer Jack's across the street from us stop in to see what's new and end up buying a cute little shelf that they didn't expect to find," she said.

"Twelve Oaks can't do that. The personal touch isn't there," she said. For shop owners, there's another reason to stick with downtown Farmington.

"It costs appreciably more to do business in the malls," said Scott Colburn, of Scott Colburn's Saddlery, Farmington. Colburn was approached by a mall to put his specialty store under a giant roof. He turned down the offer.

"It isn't that easy to make the move," he said.

Colburn, whose store concentrates on western clothing and riding gear, feels he's relatively safe from damaging competition via the malls.

"Although we carry some things the malls carry, our image is such that we're not affected by Twelve Oaks," he said.

"I think small stores will come back into vogue," said Wynell Brown, manager of the Village Goldsmith, located next to Colburn's shop.

Brown's store specializes in Indian jewelry which places her out of competition from Twelve Oaks. Although she's contemplated moving from Farmington, she's staying because it's hard for her to tell if her slow business is due to the location or novice standing in the business world.

Downtown stores have more to offer

than the crowded mall enterprises, she contends. Her store can offer personal attention, a quieter, less hurried atmosphere and lower prices.

"People spend more time here," she said.

In spite of the advantages, shop owners point out a few disadvantages to their downtown Farmington location. Most notable of the complaints is the early closing hours.

"There may be a few more things in downtown Farmington after 6 p.m.," said Ms. Brown.

SMALL town life may be worth preserving, but a little more action would be appropriate, according to Ms. Vance.

"It's a small town that's trying to stay a small town but it's not working out because of all the apartments. People like Farmington. I'd like to see a little more action."

Expanded store hours and staying open on Sunday are advocated by Mrs. Vance to keep the town on its toes.

"People like to browse and relax by window shopping on Sunday," she said.

Complaints about the image of the town are rare. Although some merchants, such as Ms. Brown, would be interested in a Birmingham type of area, others are staunch about maintaining the small town identity.

"How many Birmingham can there be?" asked Colburn.

"I think of Farmington as being traditional—a good traditional, old town," said Balden.

"Most people in Birmingham don't know each other. Birmingham can be called super-affluent but Farmington Farmington Hills will eventually wind up as a traditional area. We have a lot of old families. About 70 per cent of Birmingham names have been there about 20 years. We have fourth and fifth generations in Farmington," he said.

TWENTY years ago, downtown merchants were trying to keep heart and soul together in buildings that were badly in need of repair. That's when the city began to use building code violations as incentives to absentee landlords to fix up their property, according to Balden and City Mgr. Robert Deadman. The building code became the city's main weapon to ensure the buildings' safety.

"We started building in the late '50s. In 1957-58, it needed a lot of work. It's taken this amount of time to get it all together," Baldwin said.

Through court action and enforcement of the building code, landlords gradually began to fix up their property, according to Deadman. That became a chain reaction as

neighbors perceived their property looking shoddy compared to a renovated building, according to Balden.

Hanging signs were removed through city ordinances and the municipally owned parking lot was repaved.

The work continued slowly, so that some of the renovations went unnoticed, according to Deadman.

The Village Mall, Masonic Temple and the shoe repair shop on Grand River were all repaved.

Although plans were discussed for the introduction of a major fashion specialty shop in the area along with more specialty stores, those suggestions were abandoned.

TREES lining Grand River and the revamping of the north side of Grand River put the cap on downtown redevelopment. A Downtown Farmington Authority was proposed, making the area a special assessment district, but those plans are on the back burner.

"There haven't been any petitions for a special assessment district," Deadman said.

Downtown Farmington has come a long way, according to Deadman, who cites the Saturday morning traffic jams as signs of success.

"You know people complain (about the traffic jams.) But it puts a smile on my face," he said.

Farmington Hills: City searching for downtown

Merchants scattered throughout Farmington Hills are shivering in the shade of Twelve Oaks.

At least one of their ranks believes that, eventually, Twelve Oaks will cease to be a novelty and shoppers will return to Farmington Hills.

There will be a change, though, in the type of shopping strip they will find, according to Gary Cash, manager of the Kendallwood Crowley's store. Cash said he believes that a downtown area will eventually evolve along the Orchard Lake Road corridor in the Hills.

"That theory has its detractors.

"Where would they put it?" asked Ed Lane, executive director of Farmington Chamber of Commerce.

Homes east and west of Orchard Lake Road make it impossible to develop a continuous shopping strip, said Lane.

But Cash believes that a downtown area will be established.

"Orchard Lake Road was a two lane drag on the way out to the lakes," he said.

With the construction of an expressway ramp on Orchard Lake Road, business shifted its emphasis from Farmington Road to Orchard Lake Road.

"IT'S a natural progression after the expressway," he said. "Farmington Road was thought to be the main drag, once. The businesses

here were victims of circumstance when the freeway came in."

One of the advantages of a central business district is an increased impact on the professional lives of the shop owners, he said.

Farmington's downtown merchants can now plan mutually beneficial activities during such area events as the Founders Festival.

Scattered business districts have their advantages, too, Cash conceded.

There's customer convenience in stores which are strung out throughout town like small downtowns.

"It's easy to get to; you can park close to the store and from the customer's standpoint, there's a more comfortable lack of humanity," he said.

Others see scattered shopping strips as more fitting for a community such as Farmington Hills. Farmington Hills Administrative Asst. Michael Dorman doubted the need for a centralized business district.

"It simply isn't that kind of community," he said.

The neighborhood shopping centers are more convenience for an area such as the Hills, said Dorman.

One conjecture takes into account a possible merger of the Hills and Farmington.

"Then there would be one downtown," said Lane.



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On the corner of Farmington Road and Grand River, the Village Mall offers an example of the type of rebuilding done in downtown Farmington. Once a bank, the building houses specialty shops.