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Franklin: Storekeepers try living with history

The older suburban business districts are struggling—against the shopping centers, and against forces eroding their particular identity. Franklin Village, with its tight historic preservation ordinances, its affluent surroundings and its quiet charm, has explored one way to cope with the suburbanization of one-time small towns. Does it work? The answers offered by Franklin offer one path to the future.

By ALICE COLLINS

Tucked away upstairs in the Slade house in the center of Franklin Village, the Package Travel Service is struggling for identity and business success.

Open since March 8, it occupies rooms that previously housed a ladies' dress shop that lasted six months and a boutique that lasted only one.

The travel service is one of several new specialty shops that are part of the estimated 30 businesses packed into the turn-of-the-century homes to the single acre of commercially-zoned land in residentially-affluent Franklin Village.

The business district, lying Franklin Road for two blocks, is in the historic center of the village.

The turnover in the Slade house is an example of a trend that began about three years ago.

Merick Sherline, an energetic young Franklin resident and owner of Package Travel Service, believes the business district can find an answer to its identity problem through promotion and cooperation.

"About 99 per cent of the people don't know we're here," said Sherline. "ANOTHER JOB we have is to convince the people we're a lot more

than cute little boutiques," he added. "We've got to let the people know what we are, where we are and that if they don't support us, we'll go out of business."

Sherline and Susan Cobb, a travel consultant with Package Travel, formed the Franklin Village Business Association. Now three months old, the association's primary goal is "getting people to realize all of us are here."

"They tried to form associations before," said Mrs. Cobb, who is president of the new group, "but they never got off the ground. I'm not even sure this one is going to make it, but we're really going to try."

"We had representatives from the 30 different businesses show up at the June organizational meeting. So obviously everyone is interested in working together," Mrs. Cobb added.

FRANKLIN SHOPKEEPERS say they realize any territorial growth for the business district is unlikely easy, because of the local ordinance's dedication to maintaining residential zoning. Aside from longing for additional space for parking, some merchants are happy with the status quo. Others have sought expansion, but failed.

However, unless a business owner is willing to go to court to fight for a zoning change as Michael Michaels, owner of the Curiosity Shop property did recently, things are going to stay pretty much as they are.

Expansion will come only within current borders and under guidelines set down by local zoning ordinances and the historic commission which regulates any external structural changes.

SHERLINE'S BELIEF that Franklin people aren't aware of what the



Once the Franklin Hardware, now Gorbach's Studio of Photography.

business district has to offer is born out by an observation by Margaret Dickey, a long-time resident of Franklin who works in the village office.

She takes care of building department matters and attempts to keep track of the comings and goings of the local shops and services.

"If someone new occupies a building, he's supposed to let us know, so a building inspection can be made," Mrs. Dickey said. "But they don't all call us, so some of them come in and out and you don't even know when they came and went."

In addition to low profile locations and lack of forceful representation, another reason for rapid turnover is a recent practice of "husbands setting their wives up in business to keep them occupied."

"Cases like that don't often work out," said a local businessman who did not wish to be identified.

RUTH COULSON is owner of the Rolling Stone, a Franklin gift shop for

13 years. It's the oldest retail store in the village since the demise last winter of the 36-year-old Franklin Hardware.

She describes her business now as excellent, "although last winter we experienced our first real drop since opening." She attributed that to economic conditions.

With her success in Franklin, Mrs. Coulson, a Birmingham resident, opened a second Rolling Stone in Orchard Lake three years ago.

"A lot of people come in and think such a high income area as Franklin will automatically mean business will be great," Mrs. Coulson said. "But it takes time to get established."

Newest in Franklin is the Village Tea Room, which opened Aug. 6 in the Cogleton House. Housewives and friends Rose Galley, Sandra Volkin and Jane Roberts decided there was a need for a place in Franklin where shoppers "could sit down in a homey, friendly atmosphere and eat lunch."

"Then they can spend an entire day shopping here with friends," said Mrs. Galley.

The women and their husbands did all the interior decorating for the restaurant which previously had been a book store and before that a lingerie shop.

ACCORDING TO their register, many patrons come from outside Franklin. Other shop owners also find customers coming from surrounding Birmingham, Farmington, Bloomfield and Southfield as well as Franklin.

Everyone interviewed agreed Franklin alone could not be expected to support their businesses.

The Gorbach Studio of Photography, in business in the Detroit area for 25 years, moved its studio into the old Franklin Hardware premises in December.

Jack Gorbach said he and his family are pleased with their Franklin location and expect to stay. "Although business is relatively slow now be-

cause of the time," he added. "We work mostly by recommendation so we get a majority of our customers from outside of Franklin."

Gorbach said. "But we're convinced this community can use someone like us. We're fitting ourselves in, selling film and taking in photo finishing because there's no drugstore in the area."

Gorbach, and most of the other shop owners interviewed, listed parking as a "very serious" problem. Mrs. Coulson of the Rolling Stone said she had someone this summer to protect her two parking places for her customers.

Other recent additions to the district are the Village Barn, the Franklin-Country Workshop and Gallery and Elbinger and Sun.

Many business people in Franklin lease their premises and don't directly face a problem felt by the owners—the heavy burden of the cost of renovation and upkeep of the older structures.

New association grows in power

Although the new Franklin Village Business Association will be dealing with problems that may arise, its president, Susan Cobb, says she doesn't want the organization to become involved in "negativism."

"Being negative only turns people off," said the attractive blond businesswoman who holds three jobs, one of them being a travel consultant with Package Travel Service in Franklin.

"The whole idea of our organization is to be positive, to cooperate with village officials, to contribute to local endeavors and to be informed on local issues that may affect the business district," Mrs. Cobb added.

The association is already involved with the celebration of the bi-centennial and Franklin's sesquicentennial.

"We even considered calling ourselves the Franklin Village Cooperative Business Association," she added.



Susan Cobb heads new business association.

The association, organized in June, includes among its membership representatives of the 30 businesses and services in the Franklin shopping district.

The fourth meeting will begin at 8 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 3, in the Franklin Community Church. The group plans to meet regularly on the first Wednesday of each month.

Other officers elected were Jack Gorbach of Gorbach Studio of Photography, vice president; Sandy Barr of the Village Barn, secretary; and Dave Rybecki of the Franklin Country Workshop and Gallery, Inc., treasurer.

"Our primary goal is to let people know we're here," said Mrs. Cobb.

The association's first project was to prepare a walking map of the business district for distribution by local shopkeepers, and a business directory is planned.

Also on the schedule is promoting a Christmas Walk—an evening before the holidays when stores would stay open for shopping and browsing.

Traffic and the lack of available parking have been major problems for some of the businesses, said the president. "We hope to devote our attention to that."



Merick Sherline of Package Travel Service.



Inside the Buggy Works.



Larry Duncan at work.



At the Rolling Stone—in business 13 years.