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Main street

How one small town fights the big malls

By Julie Brown
staff writer

An apple pie and a viable downtown district may not, at first glance, seem to have much in common. Yet for both, the proper combination of ingredients is essential. If the end result is to be a good one.

At present, the city of Farmington is looking for the combination which will revitalize the downtown business district at Farmington and Grand River roads. To learn what some other downtown mainstreet communities have done to combat the shopper exodus to metropolitan shopping malls, we visited the city of Plymouth.

For a viable downtown, the recipe calls for several ingredients, according to Scott Lorenz, vice president of the Plymouth Chamber of Commerce. The ingredients? — a hotel, a bank and a newspaper.

Lorenz is knowledgeable about the hotel part of the equation. His family owns and operates the Mayflower Bed and Breakfast Hotel in downtown Plymouth. His father, Ralph Lorenz, took over the hotel's management in 1939.

"It's a meeting place, a central point," he said of the downtown hotel. "A lot of business is discussed in this building."

LORENZ SERVES as general manager for the 100-room hotel, which houses two restaurants and an English pub. The family owns the Mayflower Meeting House, a banquet hall across the street from the hotel. They also operate the Round Table Club, a private dining club.

In addition to the hotel part of the equation, financial institutions are important, he said.

"You've got to have banks that lend money. We do have good banks here." The newspaper's role is also an important one, Lorenz said.

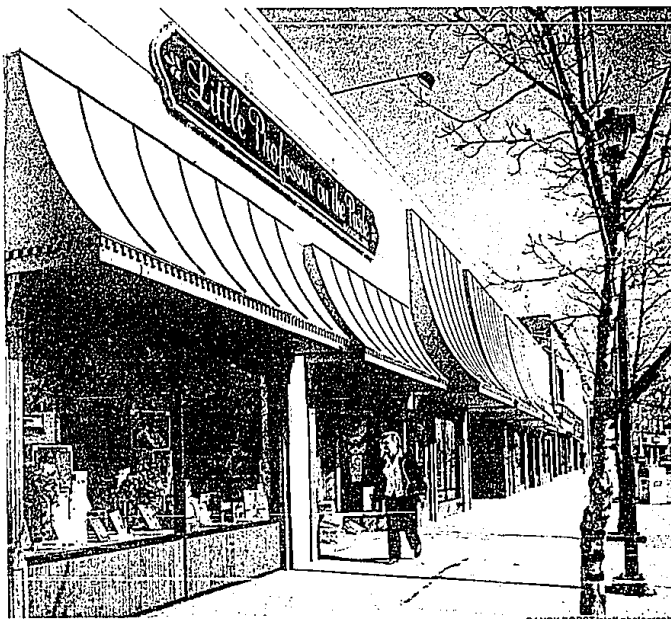
"They get the ideas out to the public." Developing a healthy downtown district takes a good deal of cooperation.

"Everybody works together in the community," Lorenz said, mentioning one unnamed northern Michigan community where such cooperation is in short supply.

"You can get people to agree on what day of the week it is up there. The government's got to create the climate to allow business to excel. If you don't have that, you've got nothing."

Lorenz credits the city commission and city administration in his community with helping make Plymouth's downtown a success.

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Plymouth is an example of a community which banded together to improve its downtown shopping area. With the cooperation of existing businesses, new business has been brought into town while store facades have been improved.

Hectic season over at review

By Julie Brown
staff writer

The Board of Review in Farmington Hills kept busy during March.

The three board members — Joan Lennis, Harlan Morris and Gordon Meyers — heard 750 appeals of property assessments. That's compared to 970 last year.

"We came pretty close to what we'd estimated," said Dean Babb, Farmington Hills assessor.

Of the 750 cases, 486 were appointments before the board and 264 were by letter. The board met 12 days to hear appeals, and met three more days for work sessions.

"We had more letters this year than in the past," Babb said Monday. "A lot of people weren't aware they could appeal in letter format. We tried to encourage certain people to appeal by letter."

Senior citizens with hardship appeals, for example, were encouraged to make those appeals by letter.

"A lot of them appealed by letter, and they were grateful they could," Babb said.

Among the 750 cases, 316 assessments were reduced by the Board of Review. For the remaining 434, the original assessments were upheld.

Within the category of hardship appeals — which accounted for 112 of the total — 67 were reduced and 45 upheld.

AMONG APPEALS based on other reasons — which accounted for 638 of the total — 249 were reduced and 389 upheld.

"It's about average," Babb said. "There's nothing significantly alarming in the numbers."

Babb, who began his job in Farmington Hills last October, is satisfied with the way things went this year.

"Overall, yes, I really was. The Board of Review is always a learning experience. If nothing else, I find out where the concerns are. From that perspective, it was good."

He gives his staff — Ted Hindman, Margaret Romer, Glenn Lemmon, Mario Mutschall, Elsie McKown and Allen Trueman — much of the credit for seeing that things went smoothly.

Babb previously worked as West Bloomfield's assessor.

"There's far more commercial and industrial property here," he said of Farmington Hills. "The residential values are not as high here."

West Bloomfield also has more lakefront property than Farmington Hills does, he said.

"And there's a lot more really expensive housing there. The housing values are lower here." Some West Bloomfield neighborhoods have homes that average \$250,000 in value, he said.

The total state equalized value for Farmington Hills properties is \$1,114,045,950. That figure makes Farmington Hills the county's third largest unit in total assessed value, behind Troy and Southfield.

"And we're growing fast all the time," Babb said. "That's the key, we're growing fast."

"The unit's growing so rapidly, both in commercial and residential. That's the challenge for the next few years, keeping up with the growth."

Hills to shine in 1985 housing sales

By Joanne Maliszewski
staff writer

When it came to home sales in Farmington Hills, 1984 was a very good year.

With a combination of public optimism over the economy and lower interest rates, officials who monitor residential real estate sales and building activity predict that 1985 should outshine last year's success.

"I think in 1985 we are going to have a lot more activity," said Marlin Rubin, an associate planner in the Oakland County Planning Office. "So much is happening in Farmington Hills."

"With the influx of new industry in the area and more development of office, I have a feeling there is going to be a lot of development in that area," Rubin said.

In the last several years alone, residential building permits (including multiples and single-family homes) issued has steadily increased, Rubin said.

In 1982, for example, 287 permits were issued, followed by 654 in 1983 and 978 last year, Rubin said.

The city has come a long way from 1980 when 396 permits were issued. The following year when the housing market took a dive, only 109 permits were issued, he said.

Rubin isn't the only one who sees a bright future.

"We should do about 20-30 percent better," said John Wald, Farmington Hills building official.

In 1984, 550 building permits for single-family homes were issued. Wald expects at least 600 to be issued in 1985.

Even with the number of building permits issued last year and the increases expected in 1985, it's the sale of homes that really counts.

Of the 589 homes listed for sale in Farmington Hills so far this year, 253 had been sold as of March 1, said Bob Craver, of Remax-Foremost in Livonia. Craver is also the president of the Western Wayne-Oakland County Board of Realtors and Metro MLS (a multi-listing company).

"Farmington Hills is doing very well," he said.

THE INCREASES in housing sales is documented in Rubin's statistics. In 1983, 641 homes (new and used) were sold in Farmington Hills. 1984 saw 663 homes sold.

The average price of a Farmington Hills home is \$89,422, Craver said. That's compared to an average \$81,346 selling price for homes in the metro listing, which covers 1,600 square miles of the Detroit area.

The average price suggested by Craver for Farmington Hills homes differs slightly from statistics recorded by Rubin in the Oakland County Planning Department.

In 1983, the average price of homes in Farmington Hills was \$89,400, according to Rubin's statistics. In 1984, the average price increased to \$91,300.

For those who may be comparison shopping, Livonia and Farmington Hills "are two market areas that really do provide a strong price spectrum," Craver said.

Between the two communities, a potential buyer can choose a house for

Crews muddy roads

While increased building activity in Farmington Hills is a welcome sight for most, it's also causing a maintenance problem on the roads.

Despite a city ordinance requiring builders to clean up the roads near their construction sites, city staff and council members have been getting complaints from residents about the messy roads.

"We've received a number of complaints," said City Manager William Costick. "It looks worse (than in previous construction seasons) because there's so much construction going on."

What city staff have started to do as a means of forcing builders to clean up the messy roads is "red tag" their building permits. When a permit is tagged that means "stop work until it's

cleaned up," Costick said.

"We're going to be very hard on the builders," he added. "The day that they make a mess we want it cleaned up — within 24 hours. On the major roads we want it done that day."

The accumulated mud creates a nuisance and also clogs up the storm sewers when it runs off the roads, Costick said.

The gravel and stone roads are undergoing much the same maintenance problem with some areas pitted by trucks and equipment and the muddy runoff, he said.

prices ranging \$40,000-\$150,000, he said.

While the average \$82,029 price tag on a home in Livonia is less than for a Farmington Hills home, Livonia has a higher amount of sales," Craver indicated.

The number of homes listed for sale compared to the number sold in Livonia is almost 52 percent compared to 43 percent in the Hills, he added.

While there are differences of opinion about the average price of a home, there's no disagreement that sales have improved over last year.

Sales in March (for the multi-listing

area), Craver said, were 27.8 percent above February's. And that's up 10 percent over 1984 at the same time, he added.

Statistics further indicate that the number of homes listed is almost 40 percent — the highest since July 1979, Craver said.

"We're off to a very good pace," Craver said. "The northeastern suburbs are doing very well. Sales have gone up significantly."

And there are good reasons why homes are a hot item.

"I think the interest rates have a lot

to do with it and a general optimistic upturn across the country," Wald said.

When interest rates were high — about 17 percent several years ago — "it was ridiculous to stick your neck" out and buy a home, Craver said. But times have changed and with interest rates ranging between 9.9 and 13.5 percent, now is the time to buy a house, he added.

Exactly what interest rate a potential home buyer can secure depends on the type of financing chosen, Craver said.

Craver also indicated that the public should not "look for them to get better. They (the interest rates) are being well received by the public."

In addition to the lower rates, the various financing programs available are also an attraction to home buyers, he said.

"It's easy to go out and secure financing," Craver said, comparing the market to several years ago.

CONVENTIONAL MORTGAGES have once again taken the popularity away from land contracts as a method of financing, Craver said.

"Land contract financing seems somewhat passe at this point," he added.

In fact, Craver said, "just shy of 60 percent" of those buying a home are going the way of the conventional mortgage.

This year's market is also seeing more first-time home buyers as well as newlywed couples (married 5-6 years) who have finally accumulated enough to make a substantial down payment. Most first-timers though are not buying new homes, Craver said.

oral quarrel

How do you feel about Dotson being jailed?

Convicted rapist Gary Dotson recently was sent back to prison after the judge in the case refused to believe the recanted testimony of the woman who originally accused him of rape.

Hillsdale Gov. James Thompson, who has the power to free Dotson, said he won't be swayed by public opinion if he is asked to intervene in the case.

Today's Oral Quarrel question is: How would you rule in the case of Gary Dotson if you were the governor?

To answer this question, call 477-5498. You will have until 1 p.m. on Friday to answer. Look in Monday's paper to see how your neighbors feel about this issue.

what's inside

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Bill proposes to omit legalese

By Joanne Maliszewski
staff writer

Imagine being able to understand insurance and real estate contracts and sales agreements without needing a law degree to help you through the document.

If a bill called the Michigan Plain English Law recently introduced in the state House makes its way through the Senate and onto the governor's desk, consumers will have a much easier time of understanding agreements and contracts.

"The object of the bill is a sound one," said Rep. Sandy Brotherton, D-Farmington Hills, who supported the passage of H.B. 4146.

"When you're dealing with a consumer, let's eliminate as much of the legalese jargon as we can," Brotherton said. "If you need an attorney to interpret it, it doesn't do any good for the consumer."

If the bill becomes law, all agreements between customers and businesses would be required to be written

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