

City's ex-DDA director resigns Southfield post

BY WAYNE PEAL

Southfield Downtown Development Authority executive director Wendy Strip-Sittsamer, on maternity leave since December, has resigned to remain at home with her new daughter.

Strip-Sittsamer, a Columbus, Ohio, native, had previously served for five years as DDA director in Farmington.

Strip-Sittsamer's resignation was formally presented to the DDA board Wednesday. It is effective at the end of her maternity leave, which ends March 11.

"It's a very demanding job and I decided I couldn't give the job, my new baby and, therefore, myself the time needed," said Strip-Sittsamer, whose daughter, Leslie Drew, was born Jan. 1.

Strip-Sittsamer, 32, had been DDA director since August 1992. She lists introduction of a leasing incentive program as among the highlights of her tenure.

"We've also had a number of discussions about redevelopment of property in the DDA area and I expect we'll be seeing something soon along those lines," she said.

Target Stores has expressed interest in vacant property along Eight Mile Road within the DDA district.

While on maternity leave, Strip-Sittsamer had been temporarily replaced by consultant David Birchler of Birchler Arroyo Associates Inc., a Berkeley-based municipal planning agency.

DDA board members were to



Wendy Strip-Sittsamer

decide this week whether to seek another full-time director.

"At this point, we haven't decided how to proceed," board chairman Frank Brock Jr. said Tuesday. Brock had learned of Strip-Sittsamer's intentions in advance.

"We're accepting her resignation with mixed emotions," Brock said. "She did a fine job for us. I know she enjoyed working here and I know she enjoyed the challenge."

The DDA is responsible for planning and promotion in

"downtown" Southfield, roughly the area including Northland Center, Providence Hospital and the Plaza Hotel.

Deciding on how to fill the vacancy becomes another challenge for the DDA.

The DDA reached a high point in October with the opening of the musical comedy "Life is a Beach" at the Millennium Theater.

That DDA-sponsored production closed in early December and DDA members seek to attract an outside producer interested in bringing another show to the former Northland movie theater.

"That production ('Life is a Beach') was the show the theater's capability," Brock said. "But we never intended to be in the theater business full time."

This year has also brought renewed attention to the City Centre project, a plan to bring more pedestrian and nighttime traffic to the area around the Prudential Town Center, across from city hall — seen by some as a rival to the DDA district.

Brock, though, said he didn't believe the two projects were in competition.

"Southfield really needs both," he said.

CLARIFICATION

An article in Monday's Observer about the city's Dumpster ordinance should have said that 3,000 letters explaining the new ordinance were sent out April 27, 1993. The city has received about 20 responses. The article also

should have said that surplus grant money for rehabilitation that he used for that purpose, but the city can then use a larger portion of the next year's grant money for capital improvements.

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Felix Photo

Unsolved arson: Farmington Hills firefighters found that the fire Jan. 9, 1993, that gutted this Harlan Drive house was an arson. The fire claimed a man and his dog.

Year later, unsolved arson fire sparks no new leads

BY BILL COUTANT

STAFF WRITER

It's been more than a year, but police aren't any closer to solving an arson fire that claimed the life of a 34-year-old Farmington Hills resident and gutted a house that dated back to 1916.

The fire, which started in the early morning hours of Jan. 9, 1993, caused the death of Tony Mendes, an automobile salesman.

"In arson cases, it's hard to get enough evidence," said Hills detective Brian DeGrande. "He had been staying there regularly, but he didn't get back from the (Detroit) auto show until about 2:30 or 3 (a.m.)."

DeGrande said police don't believe that Mendes' death was intentional, but said that under Michigan law, an arson that results in a death is considered felony murder.

At the time of the fire, which also killed his dog, Mendes was divorcing his wife Colleen. She and their three children were living with relatives in Plymouth at the time.

A friend and co-worker at Earlhard BMW in Bloomfield Hills, Pat Feely, had said Mendes had become a born-again Christian and turned his life around at the time of his death. Another friend in San Francisco, who asked not to be identified, said Mendes had

planned to move to the bay area.

"When a mutual friend called me, I couldn't believe it," the man said. "He was likeable and outgoing."

Mendes' body had been found near a window, indicating he was probably trying to escape the fire, which had spread to every room by the time firefighters arrived shortly after a neighbor called the fire in at about 6 a.m.

"We have had no tips at all regarding the case," DeGrande said.

Anyone with information should call the Farmington Hills Police Department at 474-6181.

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