

Downtown e-commerce plan slow to find takers **Fest** from page A1

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The e-commerce bandwagon is parked on the street in downtown Farmington. But so far, few merchants are jumping on board.

Despite an offer by the Farmington Downtown Development Authority to give rebates to the first 10 businesses who sign on for the "Downtown Farmington MarketPlace," only two had enrolled as of late last week.

The "Downtown Farmington MarketPlace" is an e-commerce Web site to be designed by Marketing Communications Counsel Inc., located on Grand River near Farmington Road. If the site is launched, the city of Farmington could boast of being the first in Michigan to tap into the growing, multi-billion dollar Internet sales bonanza.

But as of now, that's a big if.

The Farmington Center Florist and Bakers Street Draperies already signed up. Clothes Encounters and Three Oaks Furniture are at least semi-interested in joining, said Jody Soronen, of Marketing Communications Counsel Inc.

"I'd have liked to see it go more quickly," said Soronen, former president of the Farmington Chamber of Commerce. "I'd like to get it up and running. The longer it takes for businesses to sign on, that means the longer it takes to launch it."

The firm probably will soon meet with the DDA to revisit the concept, and whether to keep it alive, said MCC chairman Ron Baker. "People need to take a chance. Put something up and see what sells."

Marketing Communications Counsel would design and operate the site. If 10 businesses do sign up, each would receive DDA

subsidies totaling \$600 for the first year only. That breaks down to a \$60 per month subsidy, lowering the monthly fee from \$200 to \$150 — and the annual total from \$2,400 to \$1,800.

Soronen and MCC chairman Ron Baker said one of the problems might be a lack of understanding about what merchants will get for their money.

"The site is 100 percent maintenance free and it's getting people to understand that," said Baker, noting that the firm would make all necessary text and photo changes, for example.

But, Baker emphasized, merchants would still need to continue whatever store promotions they now do, and that it would be a smart idea to "let people know there's a Web site" too.

Possibly more at the heart of the matter is the cost to sign up. Several DDA merchants com-

plained at a February meeting about the fee, and that they could get Web exposure for a lot less money.

The feeling among some merchants, said Roger Ratkowski, who owns the Pasta Stop, is that the e-commerce proposal "is so outrageously expensive compared to some of the things that they are already involved in."

Baker defended the cost for businesses to sign up.

"We're not making any money on this, 10 (business) sites is basically a break-even" point, Baker explained. "We're doing it because we think it's the right thing for merchants to do."

About 10 percent of business sales are being generated online, according to national statistics, Baker said.

"And that's not taking away from existing business," Baker said.

"What people don't realize is that if the festival wasn't taken over, it most likely was going to die," Stark said.

Councilmember JoAnne McShane thanked the group for taking over and wished Stark's group well. "A lot of people really didn't realize all that was involved with the festival. There was no money tree."

The following morning, Nowak represented the DFBA's interests at the DDA meeting. Like Stark, Nowak asked for increased communication. He said his group would like a viable end point for communication with the family festival's board and the DDA.

"It's been a somewhat tense atmosphere, created because there's been no outlet for discussion," Nowak said. "We're newly reformed and we want to maintain a communicative link so it's

always open. I just want to announce our presence on an observatory basis."

Nowak said it's too late for the DFBA to bring real change to this year's event, but the group may be able to provide another set of opinions for upcoming festivals.

Downey voiced her support for the DFBA, using Traverse City's successful downtown as an example. She said the Michigan hot-spot owes much of its success to its downtown merchant's association.

City Manager Frank Lauhoff suggested that the newly formed group continue the open dialogue between city leaders, Family Fest organizers and business owners.

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the parents." Teachers also apparently like the year-round concept.

"It helps the staff and it helps the students have time to reflect on what was learned," said Vicky Shaw, who teaches fourth grade in the year-round school.

Principal Gayle Zimmerer, who heads up both the traditional and year-round programs at Gill, said the purpose of the meeting was to let parents across the district know about the choice program, which this year has about 100 students, a drop of 21 students from 1998-99. She said the Farmington school board is committed to continuing the program unless there is a significant drop in interest.

The year-round program, in its eighth year, can accommodate about 140 students, Zimmerer added. There are single classes for each grade, allowing for smaller class sizes (about 17 stu-

dents per class this year) and more individualized instruction.

"We have to inform," and that's why we had tonight's meeting," said Zimmerer, who succeeded Mike Duff at the Gill Year-Round helm in 1998. "I strongly believe in it. The whole learning retention idea, kids are learning more because of the shorter break in between."

Parents handed in registration forms following the meeting when Zimmerer asked them to at least make a one-year commitment to the program "and not leave at mid-year."

Extending the year
Although students attend the same number of instructional days (183) in year-round as they do in the traditional school schedule, the actual time students attend a particular classroom is longer.

Gill Year-Round students enjoy three two-week "intercessions," vacation breaks between

blocks of school, in addition to the same traditional holiday breaks in winter and spring that the rest of the district receives.

Intercessions are not considered part of the instructional year and students are not required to attend; but if they do, enrichment opportunities such as trips to the YMCA swimming pool will be available, the principal said.

Another parent at the information meeting, Melissa Burns of Farmington Hills, intends to transfer her son, Joseph, from the traditional to year-round program at Gill.

"I really wanted more consistency in the classroom when they're put forward," said Burns.

Burns explained that Joshua's kindergarten class was split into

four sections for traditional first grade, thus leaving only "three classmates in each."

More classmates likely would accompany Joshua from first to second grade under the year-round program than they would under traditional. That would allow for easier transitions and contribute to continued friendships and enhanced self-esteem, she said.

Positive experience

Zimmerer said there will be at least 18 openings, following the move of Gill Year-Round fifth graders to the middle school level. There may or may not be additional openings for 2000-01. Students from the Gill attendance area would get first crack at those openings, with the remaining slots determined by a

lottery.

Several parents said they would like to see a year-round program implemented in middle school. But, Zimmerer said, logistics and schedules for sports programs are a major factor in why one hasn't been established.

Asked whether students might experience problems going to a different schedule when reaching sixth grade, Zimmerer said the earlier school years are the most important ones to have a year-round program, to keep learning retention at a higher level.

"K-5 is the key" period to attend longer school years, she said.

According to Gill parent Pam Prezioso, who has volunteered to help the year-round program for

several years, "the positive outweighs the negative by far. They (the classmates) are almost like brothers and sisters after a while" because they are together for such a lengthy period.

Zimmerer told parents the district provides transportation during the extra weeks of classes and during intercessions. Other traditional "extras," including art, music and literary groups, for example, also are included in the year-round program.

The only omission is that the school's hot lunch program is on hiatus between traditional school year calendars.

March 17 is the deadline to register for next year. Call (248) 489-3690 for information. As it is a district program, there is no additional cost to parents.

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