

Walworth County Sunday

WalworthCountySunday.com

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CLASSIFIEDS
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❑ SPECIAL REPORT: SAVING DOWNTOWN

"... which leaves the old downtown, the heart, without enough blood to keep it pumping." That gives Delavan a ...

Downtown dilemma

Business owners take risk, seek more diversity

Editor's note: Saving Downtown is the first in an occasional series by freelance writer Lisa Schmelz exploring how Walworth County communities are breathing new life into their historic downtown districts.

By **LISA M. SCHMELZ**
FOR WALWORTH COUNTY SUNDAY

DELAVAN — Lois Stritt does not want to be the one to turn the lights out at Bradley's Department Store in downtown Delavan. She purchased this fading slice of Americana in 2010, and though she has no plans to throw in the towel, this 77-year-old, pint-size powerhouse freely admits that running a local department store is no easy feat in today's big box, homogenized, strip mall of a world.

"It's tough to be in business down here," she said, standing behind the counter of her 162-year-old store on a recent Thursday afternoon. "There isn't a lot of promotion for downtown Delavan. I just drove through downtown Lake Geneva and there's people everywhere. It's fabulous. But there's no reason to come here. Thank God we have loyal customers. We have a customer base of about 4,000 and they save us."

But who or what will save the other shops along Delavan's fabled, five-block brick-road downtown? None have a history like Bradley's



TERRY MAYER/STAFF

Laura Jacobs-Welch opened Brick Street Market, a specialty cheese, wine and sandwich shop, in downtown Delavan in 2008. She and her co-owners finally broke even in 2013.

— which was founded in 1852 as a knitting company and then built as a retail store in its current location in 1887 — to fall back on. Most here are new kids on the block and struggling to draw customers away from the chains and Amazon. And then there's the vacant storefronts, a sad reminder of better times in the city the circuses used to winter in. Who or what will give them another chance to be a part of our lives?

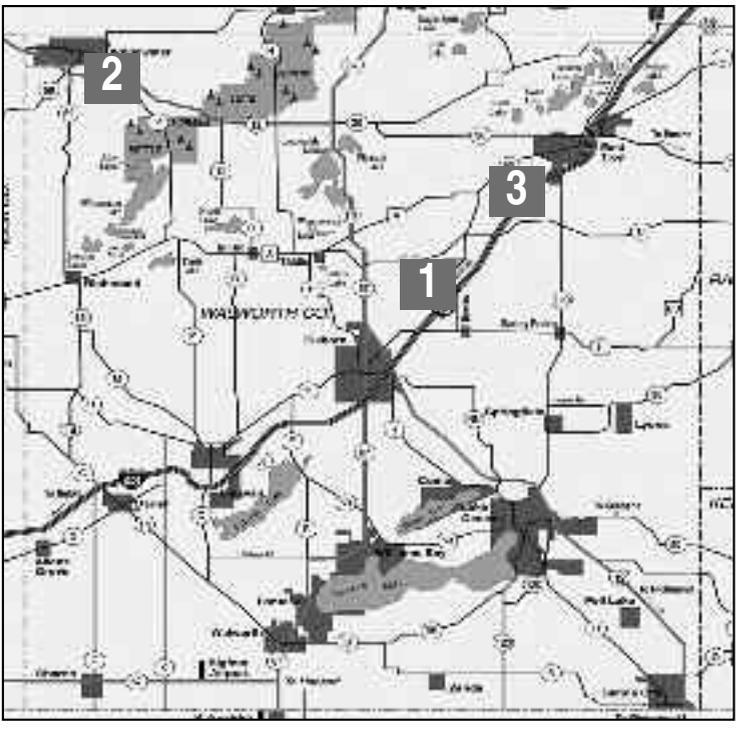
Patti Marsicano, a local historian and author, moved to Delavan from the Chicago suburbs in

1978, when she married her husband, Chris. The changes she's seen downtown in the last 36 years are many. The A&P is now the Dollar Tree. The dime store, pharmacy and furniture store are long gone. And the Delavan House Hotel, which has been vacant since 2004, has a new owner but is still bogged down in construction and funding woes.

"It was a stereotypical, quaint downtown when I moved here. Today, it suffers the same

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WALWORTH COUNTY ALMANAC



Illinois company moves ahead at shingle site

LAFAYETTE TOWNSHIP — An Illinois company will be taking over 58 acres of vacant land in the town of Lafayette for its asphalt shingle recycling business.

A Walworth County Zoning Agency committee approved the controversial conditional-use permit, 5-2, July 17.

At last month's public hearing, a packed room of county residents spoke out against the proposed company, citing such concerns as air, water and noise pollution, as well as traffic and health risks.

Reliable Materials Corporation of Illinois, a property holding company, will purchase the property at W4186 Potter Road. It plans to have Southwind RAS of Illinois run its asphalt shingle recycling business on the property.

A lawsuit, filed by town of Lafayette residents, asked that the former permits, which Southwind RAS's permit piggybacks on, be ruled null and void.

The lawsuit does not affect the decision made Thursday, said Michael Cotter, director of the county land use and resource management department. He anticipates a second lawsuit filed by the residents claiming the board's decision was illegal because it was based on previously violated conditional-use permits.

Four arrested after shooting near campus

WHITEWATER — Authorities say four people are in custody after a shooting incident reported early July 18 at apartments near the UW-Whitewater campus.

According to a release from the Whitewater Police Department, police

responded to a report of gunshots at about 4 a.m. July 18 at University Gardens Apartments, 370 N. Pratt St., two blocks west of campus.

Witnesses said several people were fighting in a hallway at the apartments. During the fight, witnesses said a shot was fired.

Police located and arrested four people who they say were involved in the shooting, including two people the Walworth County Sheriff's Office pulled over in a vehicle at an undisclosed location on U.S. Highway 12.

Deputies recovered a gun from the vehicle, according to the release.

Alpine Valley trying to bring in more campers

EAST TROY — The operator of Alpine Valley Music Theatre in East Troy is considering ways to bring in thousands of camping concertgoers, a Walworth County official said.

Michael Cotter, director of the county land use and resource management department, met with Live Nation representatives two weeks ago to discuss how Alpine Valley, W2699 County D, could compete with other entertainment venues.

Representatives want to make the venue more of a destination than a place where people arrive and leave the same day of a concert, Cotter said.

The idea of adjusting zoning regulations to allow for something like the camping situations at other music festivals was talked about at length, Cotter said, but Live Nation has not taken any steps to make it happen since the conversation.

— Compiled from walworthcountytoday.com and gazettextra.com

DOWNTOWN

Continued from page 1

problems as downtowns in small towns and cities everywhere in the U.S.," she explained. "Now, all the traffic is outside of the town and they've built the stores there, which leaves the old downtown, the heart, without enough blood to keep it pumping."

Trying to inject new blood into the artery that is Walworth Avenue is Laura Jacobs-Welch. She opened Brick Street Market, a specialty cheese, wine and sandwich shop, in 2008, just a few months before the recession came banging on the door. Brick Street, a favorite of "Fraiser" actor John Mahoney when he's in town, finally broke even in 2013. This year, she and co-owners Marilyn Cayo and Shelly Woodcock hope to see a profit.

"It could be busier for us, but I think it could be busier for everybody downtown," said Jacobs-Welch, seated at a corner table in her shop, which was once a bank and still has the vault to prove it. "People go to Wal-Mart. They don't go downtown. They don't go to Hallmark, and yes, we have one in downtown Delavan, to buy a birthday card. They go to Wal-Mart."

Niche markets

Patrice Frey appreciates Jacobs-Welch's lament against the goliath that is Wal-Mart. As the president and CEO of the National Main Street Center, a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, she hears this a lot. But historic downtowns — the Main Streets of our lives — still have a profitable role to fill, she insists.

"I think what we're seeing is a resurgence in interest in downtowns, and that's very reassuring," Frey said. "And in a time when you can get absolutely anything you want online, you see people craving an authentic experience. If anything, we're seeing a trend that really favors downtowns, and I'm not sure we would have been so optimistic 10 years ago. I think we're seeing the tide turn in favor of downtowns."

Communities that have turned that tide, adds Frey, have offered condo-type housing above storefronts, drawing boomers and millennials into everyday downtown life. They've also found niche markets. Culinary or dining experiences not available at the chains, along with unique shops and entertainment, says Frey, are proven downtown regenerators. Activity-based businesses such as Delavan Paddle Sports, which rents kayak and paddleboards on Lake Comus, also can help downtowns stay afloat.

Delavan's niche market of late appears to be resale shops. While the boom in resale shops here is keeping more storefronts from going empty, their proliferation — and at times haphazard window curation and lack of professional signage — are a branding concern to many downtown business owners. "I'm thankful for the resale shops," said Stritt, who can see four outside her store window. "People seem to like to do that these days, but we need diversity in what we offer ... we need lots of different types of shops, not a concentration of one particular kind." Adding diversity to downtown



Bradley's Department Store has been a retail store at this location since 1877. Lois Stritt bought the business in 2010. TERRY MAYER/STAFF

Delavan wasn't Cake Pastel's goal when it opened here 10 years ago, said the bakery's supervisor, Sonia Garcia. The store's owners, she said, saw a growing Hispanic market and a need. Today, that market has expanded and there is no fear of chain stores here.

They're totally different," she said. "This is a Mexican bakery, with true Mexican recipes, and we make everything by hand and from scratch. It's a large Hispanic community here, but we have a lot of (Anglo) customers coming in, too," she said.

Passing the torch

Nearly every business owner interviewed agreed that if downtown Delavan is to thrive, it has to start reaching a younger clientele. Nobody is pedaling faster to do that than Tony Valenti. The 27-year-old Delavan native holds a degree in lighting design and has worked all over the country. He recently returned home to open Avant Bicycle Supply. In an old bank on the corner of Walworth Avenue and Third Street, he's found green in the grease of bike repair and sales.

His average bike retails for about \$800, he said, and he's selling about 14 a month, just five shy of his business plan's goal. Those aren't bad numbers, considering he's only been open since April 1.

"Small-town bike shops are on the rise because everybody wants to ride down the street to get their bike worked on," he said after a 72-mile ride on his one day off a week. "Wal-Mart sells bikes, but there's nowhere to fix them."

What would he like to see more of in his hometown? Experiences that appeal to the 21- to 35-year-old demographic like "clean food restaurants, galleries and live music venues."

"When I was starting my busi-

Downtown details

■ **DiscoverDelavan.com:** Members of the Downtown Business Association are listed and available to talk to those who are considering opening a business here. Lists of available properties, for sale or rent, also can be provided.
■ **http://delavanwi.org:** For information on the Delavan-Delavan Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce

ness, and I was sleeping in my office, I could look out the window and watch young people go to the bar on the corner, The Brick House, and they'd go in, then come out and there was nothing else for them to do in town. Absolutely nothing. There are young adults who have literally given up on Delavan because there's nothing that is offered to them. They're going to Lake Geneva, to Whitewater."

Friends his age, he continued, talk with him about business ideas they have, ideas that could, once born, give downtown Delavan a true second chapter.

"I tell them, 'Just do it. Try it.' In a sense, if no one progresses, and no one takes a risk, then there won't be anything that happens," Valenti said. "And if you don't do it, before you know it, we'll all be 40 years old and there will four or five empty buildings downtown."

"I don't know if that's politically correct to say, and I don't want to sound disrespectful. But more or less, I want improvement. I want awareness. I want the younger crowd to not think of Delavan as an old city. It's one of the most beautiful cities I've been in. I feel like it's the most beautiful city in Walworth County. It just needs a little love."

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WEB POLL

Question:
Do the recent Malaysian plane disasters make you hesitant to fly?
Yes 36%
No 64%
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