

Paul Restuccia

Downtown undergoes a facelift

By PAUL RESTUCCIA

Downtown Reading is a shopping area in transition.

The district — which runs along Main Street (Route 28) and Haven Street to the Reading commuter-rail stop — is currently undergoing a \$5.5 million transformation.

On the plus side, the project will redesign Main Street and add new lighting, trees, benches and brick sidewalks.

But on the downside, work won't wrap up until mid-2009.

"It's kind of a struggle now because of the construction, but we're hoping that the facelift is going to attract some new shops," said Irene Collins, executive director of the Reading-North Reading Chamber of Commerce.

Some stores have recently closed due to changing ownership of several downtown buildings.

Fortunately, other shops have opened in recent years.

Erin Calvo-Bacci moved The Chocolate Truffle to Downtown Reading from Woburn in 2006, buying the small Main Street building that houses her store.

"I grew up in Reading and I'm happy to be part of the business community here," said Bacci, whose shop features chocolate brioche, homemade truffles and "Reading Rubble" — an homage to the downtown-reconstruction project. "We relocated here because we wanted a shop with a house-like feeling in a downtown area."

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Down the street, The Wine Shop of Reading opened in 2001, hosting biweekly wine tastings and offering specialty foods, cheeses and 500 wines from around the world.

Nearby, Lauren Gallagher cut the ribbon on Everything but the Dog in 2006, selling dog beds, dog treats and organic dog food across the street from the commuter-rail stop.

Other downtown retailers include the Atlantic Supermarket, Goodhearts Childrens Shop, Simms jewelry store and Clockfolk, which sells a selection of antique timepieces.

Each holiday season, retailers team up to sponsor "Shop the Block," providing free trolleys to shuttle shoppers to and from local stores.

"We're trying to make residents more aware of the variety of shops that are down here," said Lesley Leahy of The Hitching Post, which sells jewelry, glassware and offbeat greeting cards.

Downtown Reading's restaurants include Bangkok Spice, Twin City Seafood and cafes like The Hot Spot, which has been in town for 15 years.

"(Reading) is a great little town to have a business," said Hot Spot owner Ace Fouldes, whose place sells gourmet coffee, fresh-baked scones and muffins, kitchen gadgets and books by local authors. "Residents support the

local businesses — and the businesses support one another."

The downtown area even has its own night spot: The Venetian Moon, an Italian restaurant/bar that offers not just popular seafood and chicken-marsala dishes, but also 75 different kinds of martinis.

"We attract a singles crowd — not just from Reading but from all of the surrounding towns," said Venetian Moon co-owner Lisa Cavallo, adding that the restaurant has expanded three times since opening in 2001. "We have the feel of a Boston place, (but appeal to) those who want to stay closer to home."

As for the future, plans are afoot for a new family restaurant/pub behind the Venetian Moon.

Some locals also want to create a "smart-growth" district in the neighborhood, adding condos or apartments near the commuter-rail stop.

Additionally, local officials recently put out a request for proposals for a new municipal garage, hoping to cure the downtown area's persistent parking problems.

"The community wants a 'destination downtown' — a place where they can park, shop, browse, stroll and perhaps even live," Town Planner Carol Kowalski said. "We're looking to attract more unique, independent businesses here."

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DRINK: Lisa Cavallo, left, serves up 75 kinds of martinis at The Venetian Moon. At right, Dion Vieira shows off some of The Wine Shop of Reading's wares.

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