

Support Main Street

By Yvonne Abraham

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READING - Walking on Reading's Main Street a couple of days ago, it was impossible not to feel all "It's a Wonderful Life."

There was snow on the ground, and fairy lights in the windows. Wreaths hung on the historic buildings, and pine garlands wound around the handsome new street lamps. I half expected to see Jimmy Stewart's George Bailey rounding a corner.

But there was some of Mr. Potter on this newly paved Main Street, too: the vacant storefronts; the hulking, unlovely CVS and Walgreens stores directly across the street from each other.

This town, like many others throughout the state, has invested a lot of money and energy trying to draw locals back to the small, independent businesses of Main Street, to keep Bedford Falls from surrendering to Pottersville.

The battle has been lost in some other cities and towns, their main streets made desolate by nearby malls and big-box stores. For those downtowns that have hung on, life has gotten much more difficult since the bottom fell out of the economy. Add a hike in the sales tax and skyrocketing health insurance premiums to the mix, and it's a wonder that any of these independent stores survive at all.

But they do. Take Goodhearts, for example, the Reading children's store Debbie Rio and her daughter, Stephanie, have run for 11 years. If you're a person of a certain age, walking into Goodhearts feels like going back to your childhood, when the clerk knew your mother's name, and 9-year-olds didn't dress like hoochie mamas. Here, you can get wooden music boxes made with paint that won't poison your kid, and the kind of classic girls' wool coats you never see any more. Come January, Goodhearts is also First Communion dress central.

A lot of this stuff isn't cheap compared with the adorable, disposable stuff you can get at Target and other discount stores. So why does anybody shop here at all?

"A lot of the things we carry, you can't find anywhere else," Debbie Rio says. "And the service - we know our customers by their names and their sizes."

Down Main Street at The Chocolate Truffle, Erin Calvo-Bacci isn't doing so well. She offers addictive gooey caramel-and-chocolate-dipped pretzels, salt caramels, and chocolate covered cashews, all made by her husband. They have two other stores, in Winchester and Lynnfield, and a website that takes orders from all over the country.

But those orders are way down this season, and Calvo-Bacci and her husband have had to sell their Wakefield house to keep the business afloat, moving into a two-bedroom apartment above the store with their three children. She worries about more than just her own business, though.

“If we take away our Main Street, how will we connect and meet our neighbors?” Calvo-Bacci says. “I don’t want it to be like that.” She’s waiting out the downturn, and hoping a couple of condo developments planned nearby will bring more foot traffic to Main Street.

But really, what she needs is for people to change the way they think about stores like hers - or to start thinking about them, period.

If people spent just a little of their money locally - buying a gift or two at an independent store, or opting for one high-quality product instead of two cheaper, generic ones - they’d be doing far more than keeping a business alive: They’d be putting more money back into their own cities and towns.

Better yet, a thriving Main Street means a living, breathing community - the kind of place where local stores sponsor area Little League teams and George Bailey would feel right at home. That’s the kind of place for which a lot of us get awfully wistful this time of year.

Let’s put a little of our money where our nostalgia is.