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A LAKES GROUP SERIES

THE FIGHT FOR YOUR DOLLAR

Local businesses taking hits, striking back in world of online shopping

By Paula Quam
Forum Lakes Group

EDITOR'S NOTE: We are lucky to be living in communities where retail districts are still strong and vibrant; however, we cannot pretend that big online stores aren't a real threat to our local businesses. Some are finding great ways to adapt, but they can only do so much in their fight to stay open and viable. The rest is up to us.

The Echo Press and our other Lakes group newspapers wanted to do our part in bringing awareness to the issue because once a door is closed, it doesn't open back up. So, as Small Business Saturday and holiday shopping approaches, it is important for all of us to think of our local stores first. Our dollars are just tiny drops in the bucket for big box online stores, but for our homegrown businesses, those drops are what keep our communities prosperous and full of life.

They are like the tiny bulbs of a Christmas tree, randomly and often without much warning, going dark.

Throughout the lakes area, big and small shops of all kinds are boarding up their windows, shutting off their lights and closing their doors. They are mom-and-pop shops, as well as bigger, seemingly more "shored up" corporations that just can't seem to withstand their most fierce competitors — big box, out-of-state, online retailers.

Some communities are feeling the squeeze more than others, but the fear and the warnings are all the same: If too many little light bulbs go out on that string, all will go out. What could be left is a lot of sad, dark downtowns void of the shops people have grown to love.

The 8,000-pound gorilla

Twenty years ago, local retailers were busy trying to figure out how to withstand the "big, bad" Walmarts that were invading their local communities. Some figured it out, others didn't. But those that did are finding themselves staring down the same problem, except this time it's a problem on steroids.

"Amazon. That's a tough one," said Perham Economic Development Director Chuck Johnson. "Walmart has been the 800-pound gorilla, and now Amazon is an 8,000-pound gorilla ... and they're getting bigger."

That gorilla — and gorillas like it — are proving mighty capable of smashing bricks and mortar, as businesses across several lakes area communities have crumbled.

This year, the Viking Plaza Mall in Alexandria has been hammered twice, once when JCPenney locked its doors



File photo

Shoppers walk through downtown Alexandria last August. Although many people shop online, others still prefer to shop in stores.

and a short time later when Herberger's closed. These were two of the mall's four anchor stores.

In Detroit Lakes, the family-owned Norby's Department Store closed its doors after 112 years in business. It was a huge anchor store downtown.

“Walmart has been the 800-pound gorilla, and now Amazon is an 8,000-pound gorilla ... and they're getting bigger.”

— CHUCK JOHNSON, director, Perham Economic Development

Norby's could withstand the struggles of pioneer settlement, two world wars, the Great Depression and, yes, Walmart. It could not withstand Amazon or the roadblocks its own name-brand vendors would throw at them, including the restrictions they implemented with regards to any online business they allowed Norby's to do. After all, big brands like Nike and North Face now have their own online

stores to think about, and those harsh changes meant Norby's was left out in the cold.

They weren't alone. The Detroit Lakes Kmart, Vanity and Midwest Workwear have also closed within the past year and a half. Three out of the four buildings remain empty.

Big department stores like JCPenney are gone from some of its area locations, including Thief River Falls, Morris, Red Wing and Wadena. Many of the vacated buildings in Wadena have been filled for use as office buildings, services, a church, and recently small business retail stores. The old JCPenney building is one that remains empty.

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Today: A look at how Amazon and other online giants have changed consumer preferences, dealing some hard blows to brick and mortar stores in our own communities.

Nov. 29: It isn't all doom and gloom. Local business owners from around the region are upping their game and evolving to not only survive in this new era of commerce, but thrive.

Dec. 6: What is being done to keep local businesses strong in the face of growing competition.

Downtown still draws shoppers

By Echo Press staff

Despite several store closings in Alexandria in the past year or two, many business owners and managers acknowledge that change is inevitable, and remain optimistic that many customers still prefer shopping in actual stores.

But that doesn't change the fact that the Viking Plaza Mall has lost both Herberger's and JCPenney, two of its largest stores, within the past year, leaving shoppers wondering about the future of the mall.

In the nine months since Penney's announced it was closing, mall manager Scot Snitker has repeatedly said the mall is merely undergoing changes as it has throughout its history. He assured shoppers that he is working with new tenants for the mall.

"It's just like everything else," he told the Alexandria Echo Press. "If you look back at downtown, everything has changed and evolved. I wasn't here 30 years ago, but I'm sure it didn't look the same. Look out by the highway. When I moved here there was a truck stop, no China Buffet, no Doolittle's, no Caribou, no Culver's, no gas stations."

Downtown Alexandria

Downtown Alexandria has also lost at least two of its long-time stores, Randy's Menswear and Ben Franklin Crafts, within the past two years.

However, Ron Moritz believes the downtown still has a lot going for it. Moritz, who since 1978 has owned Yesterday's, an antique shop in downtown Alexandria, remembers that in that first year there were 11 empty buildings in the downtown area. Now, there are only a couple.

He also noted that Alexandria was recently voted as the No. 1 retail community by the Minnesota Retailers Association.

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ALEXANDRIA SCHOOL BOARD

Construction project at Miltona school moves forward

Changes made to initial design plans

By Abel Mehari
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At its monthly meeting Monday night, the Alexandria School Board approved construction documents for scaled-back renovations at Miltona Science Magnet School.

The board approved

advertising for bids on the construction plans, which are intended to address space and security concerns. JLG Architects was hired by the board last month to come up with the new design plans.

Trevor Peterson, director of business services for the Alexandria school

district, informed the board that the new plans call for a different type of structure and a smaller footprint than was proposed this past spring.

Those plans for a membrane structure with a specially-designed fabric as the shell hit a wall when the three con-

struction bids that were received in July all came back significantly higher than anticipated. The lowest bid of the three they received was for just over \$1.2 million, about \$500,000 more than the school budgeted for the project.

That caused the school board to reject the bids, and work began again on a plan that would be more

in line with the school's budget.

Peterson said that current plans call for shrinking the addition, which will be on the north side (front) of the school building. This plan, which



Peterson

is more conventional than the first proposal, is for the addition of three classrooms, with a budget of \$700,000.

The building that was used for a portable classroom will remain, Peterson said, but it will be used primarily for storage, and possibly a meeting location. It will not be

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