

BRICKS

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JCPenney and other big department stores like it were major draws to come downtown and walk around to see what else you could find, says Dean Uselman, economic development director in Wadena. The fewer local shops there are, the fewer people enticed to make the trip out to any of them.

"It's kind of a cancer that continues to eat away," Uselman said of online shops' ability to take away from brick and mortar.

For existing businesses like Weber's Wadena Hardware, the attractiveness of online shopping is something he hears every day.

"It does affect us," said Tom Weber, owner. "I bet I hear it a hundred times a day, 'I can get this online.'"

"You can get it here, too," he reminds them.

While the store offers online shopping through its Do-it-Best website, in-store shopping is still the bulk of its sales.

Ron Greiman, owner of Greiman's Printing in Wadena, recalls looking over Wadena since the main street was torn out and reconstructed in 2003. He could think of 14 businesses since that time that are no longer operating.

If one thinks it's just the shoppers and business owners who are affected by these closings, think again.

Norby's Department Store paid more than \$19,000 in property taxes last year — money that each year has helped run the city of Detroit Lakes, the Detroit Lakes School District and Becker County. That's all money lost by just one store, and while some of it may have shifted to other local stores, some was inevitably spent online and sent out of state, never to be seen in the Detroit Lakes area again.

There's also the local organizations that are directly affected when this money goes out of local circulation.

"Amazon is not donating to everything that your children are in or that you're in," said Denise Schornack, owner of Nadine's Ladies Fashions in Perham. "We all — especially in Perham because we work great together — are great at donating to community events."

Then there are the jobs. Every time a local store closes, jobs are lost. According to the



File photo

In addition to both Herberger's and JCPenney at the mall, Alexandria has also lost a couple of longtime stores in its downtown area.

Bureau of Labor Statistics, jobs in department and local retail stores have fallen by 25 percent over the last 15 years, while e-commerce jobs have soared by 334 percent. Unless there happens to be e-commerce distribution centers popping up in these smaller lakes-area communities, that 334 percent growth means nothing.

The uphill battle

This year the *Echo Press* surveyed 100 local teens and young adults under the age of 25 about their shopping habits and preferences. When asked whether they preferred shopping in-store or online, 74 reported they preferred the "real deal" and 26 preferred to make purchases through online retailers.

While shopping in-store still reigns as most popular among teens and young adults, it is no surprise that shopping with a screen is growing exponentially in popularity. The most common reason was simply convenience, but other reasons weren't so obvious.

Some said they preferred online purchasing to avoid the social components — buying online is less draining and causes less anxiety than facing people they may know, "nosy" salespeople and long checkout

lines. Other reasons for buying online include larger selections and better sales and discounts.

"I have definitely changed how I shop over the years," said Sarah Wethern of Alexandria, who is 35 years old and rarely goes to malls or stores anymore. She says she did as a teen and even into her 20s, but now online stores make everything too convenient and full of options to resist. "As a plus-size woman, I can find better deals online for clothes I like," Wethern said. "I've never found many good plus-size options in Alexandria. I've even taken to ordering groceries and household items online via Amazon or Walmart's free grocery pickup because it saves me time."

Amplifying the challenge is that people are generally busier than they were 20 and 30 years ago. Time is valuable. Minnesota is cold. When given the choice to either go outside in freezing temperatures and pop in and out of stores to find something, or to sit on a warm couch and browse the options that are so easy to select with the click of a button, brick and mortar stores have a hard sell in front of them.

"That's a hard argument to make, I'll give you that," said

Aaron Karvonen, who owns three retail stores in Perham and makes sure he remains educated on consumer trends.

The closing of Norby's just 15 miles down the highway did give him pause to re-evaluate his business models, as he was set to open up a large clothing store in Perham only weeks later. He knows what he's up against and doesn't believe for a second that a lot of people are giving any forethought into the future of their community stores when making their purchase decisions.

"It's an ultristic idea to really think that the average person is sitting there thinking, 'What if I don't have any stores to shop at in 10 years?'" Karvonen said. "They're just sitting there thinking, 'I can save \$10' or 'I can order this real quick on my phone,' and it's just so convenient."

Karvonen says the answer isn't to try to compete against Amazon, it's simply to be a better business.

"We have to deliver more value, and each business has to figure out what that is," he said. "If you can do that, then you start to win on a local level; you can start to convince people that there is a great alternative that is local."

About this series
By The Forum Lakes Group

JCPenney, Herberger's, Ben Franklin.

The closings of those well-established businesses in Alexandria hit residents hard. But in a way, residents should have seen it coming. Online shopping, Amazon in particular, has been chipping away at local businesses for quite some time.

Today is the first of our three-part series, "Bricks and Clicks," which is designed to educate readers on what's happening in retail in the lakes area — not only in Alexandria but other cities in the region, from Park Rapids to Morris.

The goal of the series is to explain the challenges, the successes, and what's being done in our communities by business owners and local governments to combat what one economic development director described as the "8,000-pound gorilla" — Amazon.

We find it fitting that this series kicks off during the biggest shopping week of the year. Did you reach for this section or the advertising supplements inside today's paper first? We're guessing the ads. But we're glad you're here, too. We wanted to give you an in-depth look at what's happening with retail at a time when retail spending is on a lot of your minds.

The dollars you spend locally are so important. We hope this series will encourage you to shop local as often as you're able, whether it's purchasing Christmas gifts for friends and family, or everyday necessities. If nothing else, we hope these stories will make you pause and think about a purchase before you look at something in a local store and buy the same item online. You might be convinced after reading these stories that keeping those dollars in your community is so vital that it changes your spending habits. That's our hope, that you learn about the importance of shopping local, what it means to buy elsewhere and make the best decision for you and the communities you call home.

The Forum Lakes Group consists of newspapers in Alexandria, Detroit Lakes, Park Rapids, Perham, Wadena, Morris and Osakis that are owned by Forum Communications Company.

LOCAL

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"Over the years, we've went through a couple of bumps, but people love the feel of old-fashioned downtown and Alexandria has that," Moritz said.

Groups of shoppers have described downtown Alexandria to him as the "coolest downtown" and said that it has the "coolest little treasures."

As bigger stores such as JCPenney and Herberger's moved out of the downtown area, Moritz said the downtown was revitalized by the appearance of more specialty, gift and boutique-style shops that moved in. He said the downtown evolved in a specialty shopping experience that didn't necessarily compete with the mall.

Lonnie Hanson from Bon Jos, a woman's clothing and tanning boutique, used to own two stores — one at the mall south of town and one on Broadway in the heart of the downtown.

In the early 1990s, she closed the store at the mall because she felt the downtown had been revitalized. The downtown store, which opened in 1965, has done well. When Bon Jos shut down

its mall store, many of her customers remained because of its location downtown.

She feels fortunate to be a part of the downtown and believes it has plenty to offer with clothing stores, restaurants, coffee shops, antiques and gift and specialty stores.

In 2014, the downtown area underwent a huge construction project, where the streets and sidewalks were torn up and rebuilt. Several store owners worried the construction would harm their businesses.

Hanson said the Downtown Merchants Association, which she is a member of, was proactive and created events to help keep businesses up and running.

"We have a great downtown and once the construction was done, it looked really good," she said.

Downtowns are where many members of the younger generation loves to shop, Hanson said, and that's especially true in Alexandria. She gets groups in her shop often who talk about how much they like the downtown shopping district. The majority of her customers are non-locals.

That's also true of Yesterdays and other down-

town stores that rely heavily on business from people who live outside of Douglas County. Moritz estimates that as much as 80 percent of shoppers in his store come from out-of-town.

Online vs. local

Yesterday's doesn't have a website, but the store does have an online presence through Facebook, where Moritz will post new items that come into the shop.

Bon Jos does have a website, but Hanson said it's not for online shopping. If someone sees an item on the site, they can call the store to purchase it over the phone. The store will either mail it or the customer can pick it up. She does not foresee the store going to an online shopping site anytime in the future.

Despite the number of people who love online shopping for the convenience, low prices and greater selection, others say they prefer shopping in stores. Then there are those who like to shop for certain items online, but shop locally for other types of products.

"I never buy shoes or clothing without trying them on first, so I will always seek out clothing and shoe stores," said Gloria Pfeifer of Star-

buck. "I eat a lot of fresh fruits and vegetables so local grocery stores are a part of my shopping each week."

Other reasons shoppers give for shopping in stores include being able to see the actual item, more convenient returns, and enjoying the shopping or social experience.

"I chose in-store because there's nothing like going shopping in-store with family and friends," said Magan Ferguson. "It's also easier to try on."

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