



INSIDE
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BRICKS + CLICKS: A FORUM LAKES GROUP SERIES



File photo

Although some downtowns are struggling in the face of challenges from online shopping and other changes, the city of Alexandria was named the Retail Community of the Year this year by the Minnesota Retailers Association.

SURVIVING AND THRIVING

RETAILERS SHARE WHAT'S WORKING AROUND THE REGION

Area stores finding ways to reach customers

Gift shop adds online sales

By Paula Quam
Forum Lakes Group

In the time it takes to read this sentence, a shopper is able to take their phone, quickly search up something they want on Amazon and with a simple and free “one-click” option, have that item on its way to their house with delivery promised in two days.

That kind of quick convenience is what local retailers are up against as they try to convince shoppers to stay loyal to them.

But it isn't all doom and gloom. When it comes to local retailers, many say that success is still theirs for the taking.

In part two of our three-part series, “Bricks and Clicks,” we delve into what can be done to help the shops in our lakes region survive and thrive.

‘Evolve or die’

Online shopping may be a bit of a growing beast in this economy, but roughly 90 percent of commerce still happens in

the brick and mortar stores. For ‘mom and pop’ shops and even bigger box retailers with tight profit margins, fighting for that 10 percent is still vital and could mean the difference between surviving or not.

“You have business model change occurring all across different industries as a result of consumer preferences changing,” said Aaron Karvonen, owner of three retail stores in Perham. He says when business owners fail to recognize those changes in what customers want or expect, they won't last long.

“It's evolve or die,” he said, adding that he believes one of the most valuable things a business can have is fresh eyes.

In Karvonen's case, it's him. The 26-year-old bought his father's furniture business a couple of years ago and has since made significant changes.

“When any person has gotten

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Nov. 23: 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.

Today: 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. 7: What is being done to keep local businesses strong in the face of growing competition.

By Lowell Anderson
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Online shopping can be a threat to traditional brick-and-mortar stores. However, it can also be the key that helps them thrive.

“If we didn't have the internet, I don't know that we would be surviving,” said Heidi Bergerson, who co-owns Scandinavian Gift Shop in Alexandria with her sister, Sandra Sheets.

Scandinavian Gift Shop, which has been a part of Alexandria since 1983, sells clothing, jewelry, candy, gifts and a wide variety of other items from Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Iceland.

When the sisters first bought the store nearly a decade ago, it had only a basic, static website. Getting involved with the internet and online shopping was one of the biggest changes they've made over the years, Sheets said.

“We almost feel like two businesses,” Bergerson added, describing the difference between selling in the store and the packaging and shipping required for online sales.

With the exception of one part-time employee and the website — which was built and is maintained by Bergerson's husband — the owners do almost everything themselves.

In addition to customers buying online from countries such as New Zealand, Japan, Australia

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An ‘overwhelming’ gift for veterans park

Local Freemasons contribute biggest donation ever

By Al Edenloff
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The Alexandria Area Freemasons made the largest donation in their 150-year history Monday night, Nov. 26.

Members of the fraternity gave \$40,000 to the new Veterans Memorial Park that will break ground this spring at the corner of Alexandria's Broadway and Eighth Avenue, east of Viking Towers.

The Freemasons first started talking about supporting the project last

spring, and all 104 members voted for the lodge to donate \$20,000. The contribution doubled when the Grand Lodge of Minnesota approved a matching grant.

Organizers of the veterans park were ecstatic. During a special presentation at the Alexandria lodge Monday, park committee members Gabe Pipo and Russ Oorlog said they were overwhelmed by the Freemasons' support.

Pipo noted the donation will put their fundraising efforts over the \$600,000 mark — two-thirds of

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‘This was a life-changing event’

Fires hit close to home for Lundeen

By Celeste Edenloff
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As her phone lit up with messages about a mandatory evacuation, Beate Lundeen had less than 30 minutes to grab what she could, get out of her house and drive to a shelter four miles from her home near Thousand Oaks, Calif.

Wildfires that were sweeping the area were headed right for her home.

“I grabbed my daughter's birth certificate, my will, my computer, my passport,” said Lundeen, who



Lundeen



Photo for The Washington Post by Kyle Grillot

Firefighters work to control a house fire in West Hills, Calif.

has lived in California since 1974. “I kept journals from when my kids were little. I grabbed those, too. And I took a couple of pieces of jewelry that I had from my

mom. And jeans, P.J.'s and toothpaste.” Lundeen, who grew up in Evansville and graduated from there in

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