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Alexandria

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Al Edenloff / Echo Press

Jingle Bells volunteers decorate trees Wednesday on the Lake Geneva Christian Center stage for the telethon. Shown are (from left) Tracey Olson (on ladder), Kayla Velon, Annette Brown, Becky Lloyd and Diana Burnett.

Dashing to make spirits bright

A ‘very, very busy’ time for Jingle Bells

By Al Edenloff
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’Twas two days before Jingle Bells, when all through the night, Volunteers were shopping to buy gifts that were just right ...

That’s just one item volunteers for the Alexandria Jaycees’ Jingle Bells Telethon will cross off their to-do list before the program airs live this Saturday, Dec. 8, from the Lake Geneva Christian Center.

“This is a very, very busy week for the volunteers to get every-

thing ready,” said Jaycees member Mike Schreiner, who handles public relations for Jingle Bells.

The telethon raises money for families in need over the holidays. Money raised from the five-hour live TV show goes to purchase food and toys for nearly 900 families each December, along with other support throughout the year.

This year’s goal is to raise \$90,000.

A lot left to do

When the newspaper inter-

viewed Schreiner on Tuesday afternoon, there was still a lot of work to be done.

On Wednesday, volunteers had to take holiday decorations out of storage and get the stage set up, complete with Christmas trees, garland and thousands of lights.

On Thursday night, volunteer dropped off bins in local businesses where people can place donated



Schreiner

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BRICKS + CLICKS: A FORUM LAKES GROUP SERIES

RETAIL IS REINVENTING ITSELF

Education, customer service among keys for area stores

By Ross Evavold
Forum Lakes Group

West Central Initiative, an organization that works to strengthen the economy in nine west-central Minnesota counties, has turned its attention recently to the region’s retail picture. At webinars in Morris and other cities it has been delivering a simple message: Small-town retail is not dead, it’s just changing.

“We were finding the negative narration that small town retail is dying,” said Jill Amundson, an associate planner with WCI. “I want to emphasize that that is not true.”

Retail sales are a powerful driver of local economies. According to the most recent state figures, gross sales from retail in 2016 generated approximately \$811.2 million in Douglas County, a 23.7 percent increase over five years.

Clearly, retail is doing its part in pumping money into the community. But big-box retailers, online shopping and consumer shifts away from malls have introduced challenges to a long-stable retail scene.

Doing business the same as it has been done for years can also be a recipe for disaster. Tara Bitzan, executive director of the Alexandria Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce, has had conversations with owners of stores that have seen growth and those that have lost customers.

“The differences in the businesses are often the ones who have adapted to the new environment or have reinvented themselves,” she said. “You have to be willing to grow and evolve to stay relevant.”

“There is no time like the present to try something new,” Amundson said.

Embracing change is one of several themes emerging in the lakes area as businesses and organizations work to keep their retail sectors strong, even as Herberger’s and selected Target



Lowell Anderson / Echo Press

Cindy Andersen of Alexandria walks through the Viking Plaza Mall after completing some shopping Wednesday afternoon.

“Most people don’t stop to think about the impact that sending their money out of the community has on the local economy. It is convenience that they think about.”

TARA BITZAN

and JCPenney stores have closed their doors in the region. In the final part of our three-part series, “Bricks and Clicks,” we explore what is being done to assist brick-and-mortar businesses, and what those shops can do to attract and retain customers.

A helping hand

A healthy retail landscape is crucial for all communities, both financially and in the jobs it creates. Small businesses employ

about half of all private-sector employees, according to the Small Business Administration, and have generated 65 percent of net new jobs over a 17-year span.

With so much at stake, local governments employ various methods to lend a helping hand, from holding or promoting community events to beautifying downtowns to finding ways to create a better business climate. Within the past few years, Detroit Lakes and Alexandria have redone its downtown streets and sidewalks to make them more pedestrian-friendly, while Wadena and Park Rapids have pursued partnerships with outside groups.

In 2017, the City of Wadena Economic Development Authority partnered with the Buxton Group, a nationwide developer that has worked with more than 750 cities of all sizes on developing retail recruitment strategies. The

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Creating a culture of mutual support

Adapting is part of survival

By Lowell Anderson
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Online shopping has changed the face of local retail nationwide. As people increasingly choose the convenience of ordering products by a click of the computer mouse, local businesses often feel a pinch on their bottom line. This is forcing all retailers, including those in smaller towns, to rethink how they do business.

Tara Bitzan, Executive Director of the Alexandria Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce, said Alexandria is ahead of the curve in many ways on this.

“Our downtown is doing really well,” she said. “There are very few empty storefronts.”

But, she said the town as a whole still needs to adapt in order to survive and thrive in these rapidly-changing times and business environment.

The local shopping district is critical for drawing visitors and tourists, she said. When people are looking at day trips or weekend get-

aways, they are looking at towns with a variety of things to do. They want to park their car nearby and walk to visit retailers, do their shopping, and have an enjoyable vacation experience.

Chamber directors from other towns have told Bitzan how much they struggle with their own downtown districts, with every third or fourth storefront sitting empty, and ask her how Alexandria is able to keep its buildings filled.

Bitzan believes the supportiveness of Alexandria’s business owners are essential elements keeping the city ahead of the curve.

“Our business sector has a strong culture of mutual support for one another,” she said. “There is healthy competition, but it is not the bitter competition found in some places.”

She also noted that there is a spirit of innovation in Alexandria, and many downtown merchants are already adapting to the online

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Echo Press file photo

Events such as the Party in the Street can bring a lot of potential shoppers into a city.

Hennessey turns himself in, appears in court

By Mikkel Pates
Forum News Service

The former manager of the now-dissolved Ashby Farmers Cooperative Elevator will be on electronic monitoring pending further actions in a federal criminal case filed

against him on Monday, Dec. 3.

Jerome “Jerry” Hennessey, 56, who had been on the lam since Sept. 10, turned himself in and made an initial appearance before Magistrate Judge Katherine

Menendez on Dec. 4.

Angella LaTour, director of community outreach for the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Minnesota, said Hennessey also is not allowed to leave the state of Minnesota without permission from a pro-

bation officer.

A release from the U.S. Attorney’s Office said Hennessey is accused of defrauding the Ashby Farmer’s Cooperative Elevator from 2003 through at least September 2018, by using

millions of dollars of elevator funds to help pay for big-game hunting trips over several years.

Federal authorities in U.S. District Court in Minneapolis charged Hennessey

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Hennessey

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