

SUPPORT

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markets and catering to the new reality. Increasingly, they are creating business websites and shipping products directly to their customers.

The solution to keeping local retail vital in the face of internet-based competition is not a simple one. But the chamber is working with others on strategies to improve the town's awareness of the value of supporting local business (see related story).

If more people understand the impact of their dollar, Bitzan thinks they would be willing to shop local more often if the product was available.

Encouraging economic development

In the past, economic developers have focused on attracting manufacturers. They were more difficult to recruit, said Nicole Fernholz, executive director of the Alexandria Area Economic Development Commission.

"Historically, we have not gone out to recruit retailers," she said. Typically, retailers have been drawn to Alexandria and the sector has developed "naturally."

However, the commission does assist retail in several ways, mainly through research. A recent retail analysis, based on 2016 data (the most recent data available), pinpoints retail trends in the Alexandria area.

It showed that spending on eating and drinking had grown just over \$7 million from 2013-16, the largest increase of any retail sector. Meanwhile, general merchandise stores, the largest contributors of taxable sales in Alexandria's economy, saw a sizable drop during that time, about \$3.7 million less in 2016 than in 2013.

Those numbers, of course, predate this year's loss of two of Viking Plaza Mall's four anchor stores, JCPenney and Herberger's. While the mall has attracted one new business - Jump4Fun, which maintains six bounce houses in the space vacated by Rue 21 - nobody has yet come forward to occupy those anchor spots.

The commission has provided demographic data to the mall that it can bring to prospective tenants, Fernholz said. It also publishes an annual fact book with information about the local area, including incomes. If retail establishments such as the mall seek more assistance, she said, "We take our cue from them."

And the EDC is shifting to adapt to what Fernholz calls a "new economic narrative" locally. Because of the critical shortage of workers, the commission is not recruiting just industry, but people. It has launched a "Like it? Live it!"



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.

Nov. 30: 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.

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

campaign on social media, trying to persuade former residents and visitors to settle here permanently.

A destination shopping area

Betty Ravnik and Patty Dusing are both board members of the Alexandria Downtown Merchants Association. They both have businesses downtown - Ravnik owns Ravnik and Company, an interior design store, and Dusing owns Trend and Couture by Ann Manning, a women's clothing boutique.

The focus of the Merchants Association, they said, is to get people downtown through different events. The two women are active in the events community and have been a part of several events, such as the Wine and Art Crawl, Party in the Street and Crazy Daze. Those types of events have created a tremendous response, they said, and usually draw big crowds.

Both women feel that the downtown's strength is that it's a one-stop shop and that it is walkable.

Ravnik and Dusing give a lot of credit to other sources besides the Downtowners Association for promoting downtown as a destination shopping area. That includes the Chamber of Commerce, Explore Alexandria, the City of Alexandria and others.

The two store owners feel that brick and mortar shopping businesses will always remain because of the experience it provides. Shopping in a store is about the interaction and the experience, and one they feel will never go away.



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