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WEEKEND POSTBULLETIN

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Out of the closet and quarantine

Emphasis on self-care led some to sexuality breakthroughs

BY ANNE HALLIWELL
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As the world as we know it changed on a global scale over the past 15 months, Rochester resident Liz Spafka's life changed in big ways, too. Spafka (they/them), a 23-year-old nursing assistant at Mayo Clinic, came out as nonbinary — neither male nor female — during the past year.

They had questioned their gender pre-pandemic, but had "tabled it" because they didn't have the knowledge or resources to understand.

"During quarantine is when I decided to do something about it," they said.

They think the emphasis on self-care during stressful times contributed to their decision.

"The world has kind of sucked for a while," they said. "I might as well figure out something good in there."

Ashleigh Dowis, director of clinical services at Family Service Rochester, said coming out is a complicated process for every individual. However, the isolation of the pandemic may have allowed for more self-reflection and self-assessment.

SUPPORT FROM HOME

Individuals who didn't have support previously may have found it in an online community, or in coming together with family — as in the case of 19-year-old Madison Leske (they/them).

Leske came out as gay while attending Brigham Young University-Idaho during the summer after COVID-19 hit. They finished the year,

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Joe Ahlquist / jahlquist@postbulletin.com

Pedestrians walk past empty office space in the Massey Building at the corner of First Avenue Southwest and Second Street in downtown Rochester.

Pace of comeback

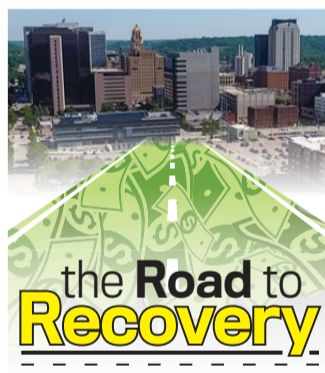
Fewer workers give downtown its challenges

BY JEFF KIGER
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As the COVID-19 pandemic wanes, much of Rochester's economy is revving back up.

However, one area — Rochester's downtown core — seems to be bouncing back more slowly.

The one thing that downtown in 2021 doesn't have that it did pre-pandemic is as many workers to buy coffee, eat lunch, take breaks to grab snacks and generally provide a foundation of activity. That's a foundation that has traditionally been there for Mayo Clinic visitors and other Rochester residents who drive in for



downtown meetings or happy hour gatherings to build upon.

Key to downtown's economy is the approximately 20,000 Mayo Clinic employees, about half of Mayo's Rochester workforce. Restaurants, retail

INSIDE:

A3: Hotels slowly rebound from pandemic lows

A4: Eagle Store feels the pinch

NEXT WEEK: Why is it so hard to fill some jobs? Do employees have more leverage now? How have some businesses adjusted to having fewer workers? We'll examine a host of workforce issues.

stores, nail salons, coffee shops and more count on those Mayo Clinic employees as their primary customers.

Today, the Post Bulletin begins a four-week series examining the state of the economic recovery. Will downtown bounce back? If so, how? Why is it hard

for employers to fill many unfilled jobs? What is the future of the home office? These questions and others will be addressed in the course of the series.

The pandemic forced much of Mayo Clinic's non-clinical workforce to work remotely. Now as the threat of COVID-19 lessens, many of those employees are continuing to work from home, for at least part of the week. The impact is hitting downtown harder than other parts of Rochester due to the density of Mayo's presence in downtown.

"Approximately 2,900 staff who were previously based in downtown Rochester will

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5 things to know about Down by the Riverside

Post Bulletin staff reports

Down by the Riverside, arguably Rochester's most popular summer concert series, brings thousands to Mayo Park for free local opening acts and national shows on Sunday nights in July and August. Since 1992, Down by the Riverside has hosted groups like Blue Oyster Cult, the Dixie Chicks, Kansas and many more. Here are a few things to know about this summer's lineup.

1. I SAY "YEE," YOU SAY "HAW"

Sunday's show kicks things off with country singer Lindsay Ell, with local opener Luke Hendrickson, at "Hot Country Night." The other shows are all themed — like "Minnesota Music Night" featuring Chastity Brown and Blue Dog, or "'90s/Alt-Rock Night" with Smash Mouth and Rochester reggae group Push &

Turn. And many, many more.

2. BYOC

That's Bring Your Own Chair (or Cooler, or Cash). Mayo Park is totally open to picnic blankets, lawn chairs and coolers if you'd like to really make a night of it. And keep an eye out for on-site concessions.

3. PARK IT

A reminder: Rochester parking meters and ramps only charge between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. on weekdays. Grab a spot where you can (we like the ramps off Civic Center Drive and Second Street SE, near the library). Of course, biking, walking and car-pooling are encouraged.

4. IT'S SCHMIDT'S LAST HURRAH

Rochester Civic Music director Steven Schmidt announced his retirement earlier this summer. But before that, he's giving us a heck of a



Andrew Link / alink@postbulletin.com

Neighbors, clockwise from lower left, Marilyn Olver, Dave Edwards, Gary Dutton, Adam Dutton, Kris Edwards, Karl Solie, Brenda Solie and Bri Solie, sit in a circle sharing stories in the middle of the crowd as they wait for the season's final Down by the Riverside concert to begin on Aug. 18, 2019, at Mayo Park in Rochester.

concert season — check out the city's forWARD concerts for another taste.

5. MARK THE CALENDAR

Catch free concerts in Mayo

Park every Sunday night between July 11 and Aug. 15. Opening acts start at 7 p.m., and the headliners will hit the stage about 8.

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WEEKEND

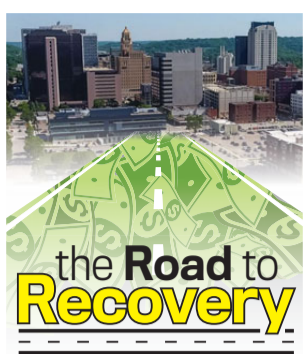


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Eagle Store: ‘We need people to come back and work downtown’

BY JEFF KIGER
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In the summer of 2019, customers almost always had to wait in line to buy a soda or snack at the Eagle Store in downtown Rochester. That’s rarely the case today as the store usually has only two or three shoppers at a time.

Despite the return of more Mayo Clinic patients as the pandemic wanes, the customers have not returned to the long-time shop at 23 Second St. SW on the once bustling corner of Second Street and First Avenue.

The Williams brothers, who run the small general store along with their 91-year-old father, say it isn’t a mystery why their business is still down by 50 percent or more.

“We need people to come back and work downtown. We need events back at the Civic Center. We need Mayo back at 100 percent,” said Steve Williams as a single customer browsed the shelves. “It is really quiet. You could roll a bowling bowl down the sidewalk in the morning and not hit anybody.”

They say the store has weathered many ups and downs in Rochester’s downtown during its long history. However, Mayo Clinic employees were always there in the past, no matter the construction projects or other obstacles. For them, that’s the piece of the economic recovery that is still missing.

Mayo Clinic officials say approximately

2,900 of the 20,000 Mayo Clinic employees who were previously based downtown now work remotely off campus a majority of the time. That’s an increase from the previous estimate of 1,500 employees no longer in downtown that Mayo Clinic made in October.

John Williams, practicing his guitar at the checkout counter as he waits for customers, said it feels more like 10,000 Mayo Clinic employees are gone.

“We depend on foot traffic. I used to see Mayo employees come in here two or three times a day. Now I’m lucky if I see them once a week,” he said.

A look through the windows of the Massey Building across Second Street shows rows and rows of empty Mayo Clinic desks. Mayo Clinic has already told the building’s owner that it will not be renewing its lease for that space.

John Williams pointed out that Mayo Clinic started moving downtown employees to its 41st Street campus in northwest Rochester even before the pandemic. He said any employee moved out of downtown is a loss of a customer for at least one restaurant or shop.



Photos by Joe Ahlquist / jahlquist@postbulletin.com

John Williams, one of the owners of the Eagle Store, helps a customer on Wednesday at the family-owned store in downtown Rochester.



Michelle Mikkalson, who lives in Mantorville and works in downtown Rochester, browses the greeting cards at the Eagle Store in downtown Rochester.

Of course, Mayo Clinic is not the only employer to shift staff to working remotely during the pandemic or even move out of downtown. However, it is, by far, the largest.

Essence Skin Clinic, next to the Eagle Store, moved out of downtown in May and its high-

profile spot remains empty. Its owner cited the many construction projects and design charges downtown as the primary reason for their departures. Valor Mechanical recently packed up its downtown office and moved to Stewartville. Accounting and

financial services firm Smith Schafer and Associates recently announced that it plans to move its 45 employees out of downtown. Steve Williams estimated the non-Mayo employees that are no longer downtown at about 1,000. Michelle Mikkalson,

who works for the brokerage investment firm Stifel and visits the store about once a week, is still there as she has been throughout the pandemic. She was in the Eagle Store on Wednesday to buy a greeting card.

“These guys are awesome,” she said, gesturing to the Williamses. “It has been eerie with downtown so quiet, but it is getting better... I think Mayo needs to bring more people back.”

Mayo employees or not, Rochester’s downtown streets are getting more and more active again as patients and others return. However, it’s not enough for the Eagle Store to see the crowds that it did pre-pandemic.

“I get a whole lot of practice these days,” said John Williams looking up from his guitar. “It’s bad for my business, but I guess it is good for my guitar playing.”

Downtown

From page A1

now work off campus a majority of the time,” stated Mayo Clinic Spokeswoman Ginger Plumbo. “This number evolved as Mayo Clinic continued to assess the workforce beyond the initial group of non-clinical administrative staff.”

That number has risen from the one Mayo Clinic reported in October 2020, when it stated that 1,500 former downtown employees were working from home.

Many of Mayo Clinic’s employees live outside of Rochester in nearby communities, like Stewartville, or in the Twin Cities area, so eliminating a daily commute is a big personal benefit. For Mayo Clinic, it means the end of what was a constant hunt for more downtown office space.

However, removing that many bodies from downtown means Rochester’s post-pandemic downtown will look different than before.

Plumbo points out that the current number of downtown employees is “very similar to the number of Mayo employees based downtown as recently as 2018, and the downtown economy was thriving then as well.”

Yet, that is not a comfort in 2021 to downtown restaurants that once were packed with lunch customers or to quiet stores that once had long lines at their cash registers.

“We depend on foot traffic. I used to see Mayo employees come in here two or three times a day. Now I’m lucky if I see them once a week,” said John Williams, who runs the Eagle Store in the heart of downtown.

DOWNTOWN STILL IMPORTANT TO MAYO

Erin Sexton, director of

Enterprise Community Engagement at Mayo Clinic, acknowledged that there is a transition happening, though she emphasized that downtown is still very important to Mayo Clinic.

“Things will be different... I think there’s going to be a little bit of learning all the way around this summer to see how people start to reutilize and frequent the downtown, because, obviously, downtown’s a big part of who Mayo Clinic is,” she said. “We sit downtown. Our patients and our visitors utilize the downtown businesses.”

Part of those changes involve Mayo Clinic changing many of its traditional offices in the Ozmun East Building to “drop-in” workstations for hybrid workers and creating “collaboration spaces” in the Siebens Building and Rosa Parks Pavilion Building for groups to work on projects.

When pressed for details about Mayo Clinic’s future downtown presence, Mayo Clinic’s Chair of Facilities Doug Holtan said it is developing.

“We know right up front is going to be a learning process... We’re also assessing how we are using our campus as we freed up space from those that are working remotely primarily,” he said.

Part of the evolution of Mayo Clinic’s downtown presence will be reducing its footprint as it needs less office space.

“As we have leases coming up for renewals in the next one to two years, we will be looking very hard at not renewing those leases in the short term,” said Holtan. “We have talked to a lot of business owners about that as we plan for our changing business needs.”

That translates to ending leases in downtown buildings, like the historic Massey Building at the corner of First

Avenue Southwest and Second Street.

However, Holtan did stress that Mayo Clinic will continue to need to lease space downtown to meet its office and research needs beyond the buildings it owns.

“We have three major downtown buildings where we have leased space – the US Bank Building, the BioBusiness Center and the Wells Fargo Building. We have longer term leases on those buildings and we will continue to use them,” he said.

Mayo Clinic also has a large presence in the One Discovery Square complex as an anchor tenant with many spaces housing partnerships with companies like Thermo Fisher Scientific, Exacts Sciences and Boston Scientific.

Mayo Clinic may also end up leasing some space in the much larger Two Discovery Square center being built next to the original one.

“We’re looking at potentially having some presence, but a much lower or much smaller footprint ratio. We really want that space to be for industry partners and not for us to have a majority footprint,” he said. “If there is a true business or a partnership with industry, we may look at some space in the building. But definitely, we don’t want to just have a large footprint.”

Beyond Mayo Clinic, many other commercial spaces are currently unused or in transition in downtown.

‘LATE-NIGHT LIFE THAT IS SAFE AND FUN’

Two popular late-night watering holes, Legends and Dooley’s, closed and those spaces remain unused, as does the former Fusion Lounge/Top Shots spot and the Bar Buffalo space. That leaves Kathy’s Pub as the primary late-night hot spot for young people.

“I’m sure Kathy’s would like to see other bars and restaurants open up around them to take some of the pressure off of them. The more businesses you have, the better you do,” said Rochester Downtown Alliance Executive Director Holly Masek. “I’m hoping that some kind of late-night life that is safe and fun, can come back for younger people. They really, really do want that, but everybody wants to feel good about it... In my mind, more activity is generally better as long as it is kind of respectful and under control.”

While there are several empty storefronts downtown, Masek said that many are filling up.

Looking at the block of South Broadway where the RDA’s office is located, she said all of the open slots have new tenants committed. That includes the recently closed Nellie’s on 3rd Kitchen and Bar, which is transitioning into a Thai restaurant, and a former art gallery, which will become a tattoo studio called Sorry in Advance.

The former Big Brad’s on Broadway bar is being revamped for a new tenant, Treedome. Treedome, an “entertainment-focused creative studio,” is moving from Winona to downtown Rochester.

Treedome’s Production Director and co-founder Nate Nelson said moving into Rochester’s core is a good fit for his growing business.

“From our perspective, we’ve seen dramatic shifts as Rochester has become one of the larger hubs for the area music scene,” he said. “It’s a super walkable area. Plus we’re not dependent on Mayo employees.”

It was also attractive that his team members are friends with many of the other tenants in that block, including Cafe Steam’s Will Forsman and

Luke Austin of Sorry in Advance.

“One of the big reasons why we focused on downtown is the feel of that block. We think it is a good encapsulation of this new wave of arts and culture in the area,” said Nelson.

Overall, Masek is very optimistic about the future of downtown as the number of residents in the area grows. She said the number of people living downtown has doubled since 2010. While the number of downtown employees might be on the downswing, she said studies show elsewhere that residents spend seven times the dollars that day workers do in a downtown area.

While the mix of businesses might be changing to better match the evolving demand, she still sees people interested in Rochester’s urban core.

“I feel really positive about it. I really like the uniqueness of the businesses that have opened over the last year. And I’ve got a lot of respect and appreciation for the ones that made it through with just huge amounts of innovation and adaptation,” said Masek. “A lot of negative messages went out over the last year about COVID hotspots downtown... about construction downtown... about parking downtown. People need to flip the mindset and celebrate how interesting downtown is.”

EVERY DAY:
Heard on the Street

Columnist Jeff Kiger has his ear to the ground when it comes to business news. Hear it first with Heard on the Street.

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