

Downtown impact study reveals local market data, challenges

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Bardstown's downtown area is unique and special, but needs to work on marketing and sustaining a local customer basis, a study by Eclipse Communications, a Kansas-based firm, revealed Thursday morning.

In a public meeting held at 8:30 a.m. in the Fiscal Court Room at One Court Square, business owners and community members came together to hear the findings.

The study, several months in the making, surveyed 350 people to find out answers to questions such as: How is the downtown area doing after the courthouse relocated? Who shops downtown and why do they shop there? How can downtown Bardstown revive itself after a year of slower traffic than usual?

Kentucky Renaissance Program coordinator Karen Keown told those present Bardstown is a role model for small downtown development and upkeep.

"You are the barometer they measure their success to," Keown said.

The market analysis was fully sponsored by the state Renaissance program and Keown stressed Bardstown was the only community given the opportunity.

Out of the \$2 million awarded to the Renaissance program in the state, communities such as Bardstown will be able to receive funding for downtown development and promotion.

However, a prerequisite for the grant is a complete market analysis.

Bardstown is ahead in the process now that it has released its downtown impact study, Keown said.

Presenting the study's results was Scott Sewell, owner with Eclipse Communications.

Survey findings were surprising at times and natural in other areas, Sewell noted.

For example, the trade area was "a little more local than I thought," Sewell explained.

Local customers make for the majority of the shopping and dining activity in downtown Bardstown, a whopping 75 percent.

Only 25 percent are tourists exploring the area, according to the surveys.

Locally, people have said the highlights of shopping downtown are the good prices.

"Everyone's looking for the best deal," Sewell pointed out.

However, the 50 merchants surveyed ranked their quality products and excellent customer service as top reasons why locals spend money downtown.

The survey also highlighted the local perception of downtown as a clean, friendly, attractive place but with a downfall in the areas of clothing — men's, women's and children's.

People go to Elizabethton for such shopping, Sewell added, which is not a new trend according to the business owners present.

In his presentation, Sewell also looked at recent changes in shopping habits since the courthouse moved to another side of town, taking its business along.

The move seemed to affect the downtown area, but not as much as having other “anchors” move out.

The medical center, library, banks and post office are what keep people in walking distance of the shops and restaurants inviting them inside.

With Flaget Memorial Hospital on its way to a new site and the library changing locations, the downtown will lose some of its important “anchors.”

The key is still in its local customers and the way businesses market to them, Sewell said.

“You have a very functional downtown,” he said several times in his speech.

Keeping a busy atmosphere, offering incentives, advertising and creating partnerships will keep the downtown area functional for the community and attract tourism and more businesses.

Creating possibilities for community members to live downtown in quality housing was also mentioned as an important factor in downtown revival.

Second-floor living with a great view and no shoveling or mowing to worry about is a desirable solution for many singles and even families, Sewell said.

Mayor Dixie Hibbs added there are currently 9 buildings with second-level housing.

Through a downtown loft tour, the city could cater to people who will in turn spend their money in the stores and restaurants located downtown.

“Local consumers keep the downtown healthy and alive,” Sewell said.

Another guiding principle Sewell mentioned was retaining existing businesses in the downtown area in order to recruit new business owners.

“Change is inevitable,” he told the audience. “You have to acknowledge it.”

His speech had mixed reactions from the audience.

Gloriella Forsee, boutique owner downtown, said the past year has been a slower version of past shopping seasons.

In conclusion, Kim Huston, president of Nelson County Economic Development Agency and Dawn Ballard, vice president for tourism marketing and development, had positive words to lighten up the future of downtown's businesses.

Huston said free marketing and small business seminars for downtown merchants will help in their self-promotion efforts.

“Be with us, walk with us through this process,” Huston said. “We are working. It does take time to turn around.”

Dawn agreed. In her marketing efforts, she said, downtown is ever-present.

“It is a vital component of what we do,” Ballard said.

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