

Downtown loyalty could pay off

Elizabeth Willis • *The Enquirer* • December 13, 2010

Some businesses have remained loyal to downtown Battle Creek, despite a sometimes rocky journey.

Elwell Salon and Worgess Insurance Agency, two businesses that have drawn people to the downtown for decades, have recently moved closer to the city center.

Elwell Salon opened Tuesday in the former Godfrey Jewelers storefront at 12 W. Michigan Ave.

On Nov. 15, Worgess Insurance moved to 2 W. Michigan Ave. from 55 N. McCamly St.

After several requests for an interview, Worgess Insurance President John Page said he was unavailable for comment. But his landlord Bill Schroer said Page's decision was made in part because of an expected influx of businesses with the ongoing downtown transformation plan.

"Businesses have the opportunity to be on the ground floor of what could be a major transfusion of talent downtown," he said. "I don't know when we're going to get there, but I think we're closer than we've been in the last 15 years."

Salon owner Stan Elwell said he scoured the city for a new location -- and nearly chose one on Columbia Avenue -- but his goal was to stay downtown, near his salon's main customer base.

He retained the glamorous feel of the renovated jewelry store with chandeliers and soft lighting.

It was the perfect place for his displaced salon, he said. After 45 years in the industry and 18 years at McCamly Plaza, he was given 30 days notice to leave.

"We were told we didn't fit their plan," he said.

But because many of his customers are employees of Kellogg Co., the W.K. Kellogg Foundation or the Hart-Dole-Inouye Federal Center, he said he made the effort to stay downtown.

"We like it downtown -- the atmosphere and the new

things that are coming," he said, mentioning the upcoming streetscape redesign and plan to build an events plaza. The location's ample parking was another plus.

Easy and familiar store access also has been key to keeping Rice's Shoes downtown, though owner Corey Williams said he thinks higher profits could have been made in other parts of the city, where there is more foot traffic.

Tradition is part of it, Williams said.

Rice's Shoes, at 62 W. Michigan Ave., has been a part of the downtown since 1948.

"A lot of our older customers, when they think of Rice's Shoes, they think of downtown," he said. "We're a true destination."

Williams also moved his other business, Battle Creek Flowers, into the building two years ago from Columbia Avenue on the advice of former Downtown Partnership Director Kathleen Eriksen. He said he lost \$100,000 in sales that first year.

But now that the shoe store and flower shop are kitty-corner from a building recently occupied by about 600 Kellogg employees, Williams has been encouraged to expand his shoe store's inventory to include a younger look.

Sales have been up 37 percent this year, but he said it's too soon to tell if that's because of the downtown transformation.

Elwell said he sees potential in the ongoing plan to revitalize the city center, but was disappointed in the help he got from the Downtown Partnership, a division of Battle Creek Unlimited. BCU is leading the downtown transformation plan.

"They didn't even mention this building," he said. "I had to do it all on my own."

BCU President and Chief Executive Officer Karl Dehn said he would do whatever he could to correct the situation.

"It's my understanding a list of available properties downtown were provided, but if the consumer doesn't feel like it was user-friendly, we take that very seriously," he said.

Dehn said destination companies like Elwell Salon, Worgess Insurance and Rice's Shoes are essential to the downtown's growth.

Since the transformation plan was unveiled two years ago, about 900 employees have moved downtown, Dehn said. Their presence adds to the "critical mass" of people needed to support a fully occupied downtown.

"A certain number can be sustained right now," he said. "But the larger we can make that mass, the more businesses we can support."

Dehn said businesses continue to contact his office with inquiries about the downtown. Most are those that would serve a professional clientele. Several restaurants have looked and at least one is seriously considering the move.

"There's definitely interest in the downtown," he said.

Elizabeth Willis can be reached at 966-0684 or ewillis@gannett.com.