

REVITALIZING Macomb's downtown

Entrepreneurial spirit thrives in Mount Clemens

By Natalie Broda

While many downtown areas struggled during the lockdowns of the coronavirus pandemic, downtown Mount Clemens wasn't one of them.

Not a single business closed in that time as a result of the virus. In fact, the downtown gained new businesses as local leaders and entrepreneurs continue to conceptualize and revitalize the four square blocks that make up the downtown of the county seat. From beautification projects to a redesign of the old Cherry Street Mall, there's a lot planned for the future of what's referred to as Macomb County's urban center.

When the pandemic began, the Mount Clemens Downtown Development Authority knew its restaurant businesses would be hard hit, according to Michelle Weiss, marketing



Residents and visitors pack into downtown Mount Clemens on a sunny spring day as business continues to grow in the community. Not a single business closed during the lockdowns of the coronavirus pandemic.

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Top: Melissa Lavender, owner and founder of Clementine's Pastries, mixes up a batch of frosting on a spring Saturday morning in downtown Mount Clemens.

Above: Black Cat Coffee, downtown Mount Clemens' first new coffee house in over a decade, is one of several new businesses attracting visitors downtown.

PHOTOS BY NATALIE BRODA — MEDIANEWS GROUP

coordinator for the authority. The DDA spent over \$15,000 to purchase cafe tables and chairs to help keep many businesses afloat. Soon, Weiss said they were finding that their restaurants were seeing more orders than before the virus began.

"We had to get creative, and that's what we're all about right now, thinking outside the box," Weiss said. "We want to try anything and everything to get this downtown where it should be. We're looking forward just like our businesses are looking forward, believing in themselves and knowing they can do it because failure isn't an option."

Weiss is a longtime business owner in the area, taking after her father and grandfather who also owned companies and shops in Mount Clemens. When asked why she believes the downtown was able to gain new businesses at a time others were closing, Weiss credited the entrepreneurial spirit of the people who chose to live and work here.

"The pandemic gave people the chance to look at what they're doing and perhaps realize they weren't happy. It gave them the chance to try something they've always dreamed about," she said.

Melissa Lavender, owner of Clementine's Pastries, is one such example of that taking place. With 30 years of culinary experience and training, Lavender found herself unemployed as the pandemic took hold. Her and her husband live just down the street from downtown, and as Lavender contemplated her next move, she was encouraged by her family to follow her lifelong dream of opening her own pastry shop. Less than a year and \$100,000 later, Lavender opened the shop named after her grandmother in the same space that Weiss' father once ran his business.

"I'm very committed to this city and I can say that after these first few years in business, I'm so glad to be here. I didn't know how people would respond, I didn't know what I was doing, but everyone made me feel so comfortable to the point that any business that comes after me, I want to do that for them," Lavender said.

From five employees to 12 today, a slow day for Clementine's Bakery is never really slow at all with between 60 to 70 people coming through the door. On a busy day, like the Saturday before Easter, more than 300 people usually visit the shop.

Beyond new businesses, there's plenty else that's attracting new visitors to downtown Mount Clemens. The city's farmer's market has also moved back downtown in recent years, bringing about 3,000 people to Mount Clemens each week it operates. The DDA alongside private donations also invested \$30,000 last year to add holiday street lighting to the trees that line the streets. New murals and a sculpture installation program are also drawing eyes to the city.

There's another big project on the horizon that will significantly change the face of the downtown, according to Brian Tingley, executive director of the DDA. The old Cherry Street Mall building, constructed some 30 years ago, is slated for a partial demolition and redevelopment.

"This would be one of the biggest physical projects in the

downtown area in the last 25 years, it's a huge step for us to take," Tingley said.

The project will not only beautify the area, it will also signify the downtown's departure from pedestrian mall structures. Historically, it was the expansion of pedestrian malls and sprawling retail that affected downtown Mount Clemens' retail structure the most as businesses moved away. Now that they're returning, along with residents who want to visit their downtown, the DDA and city leaders will seek to redesign portions of the downtown to suit the trend.

John Hanna, a local developer who revitalized the Emerald Theater and recently opened the downtown's first new coffee shop, Black Cat Coffee, said the interest in Mount Clemens is growing more visible throughout the region.

"In terms of places, Mount Clemens has something special. We have the tools to create a real downtown core here. The entire city is imbued with this sense of history and hope for the future," Hanna said. "We're receiving this positive attention that is helping to continue the trend of forced motion in the direction that businesses here want to go. We're creating a city where we all want to live and work, and we know now more than ever that it's truly possible." **M**

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FOR YOUR INFORMATION

- Clementine's Pastries is located at 57 Macomb Place, Mount Clemens. For more information visit clementinespastries.com or call (586) 477-0359.
- Black Cat Coffee is located at 55 Macomb Place, Mount Clemens. For more information, visit coffeeatblackcat.com or call (586) 477-1903.



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